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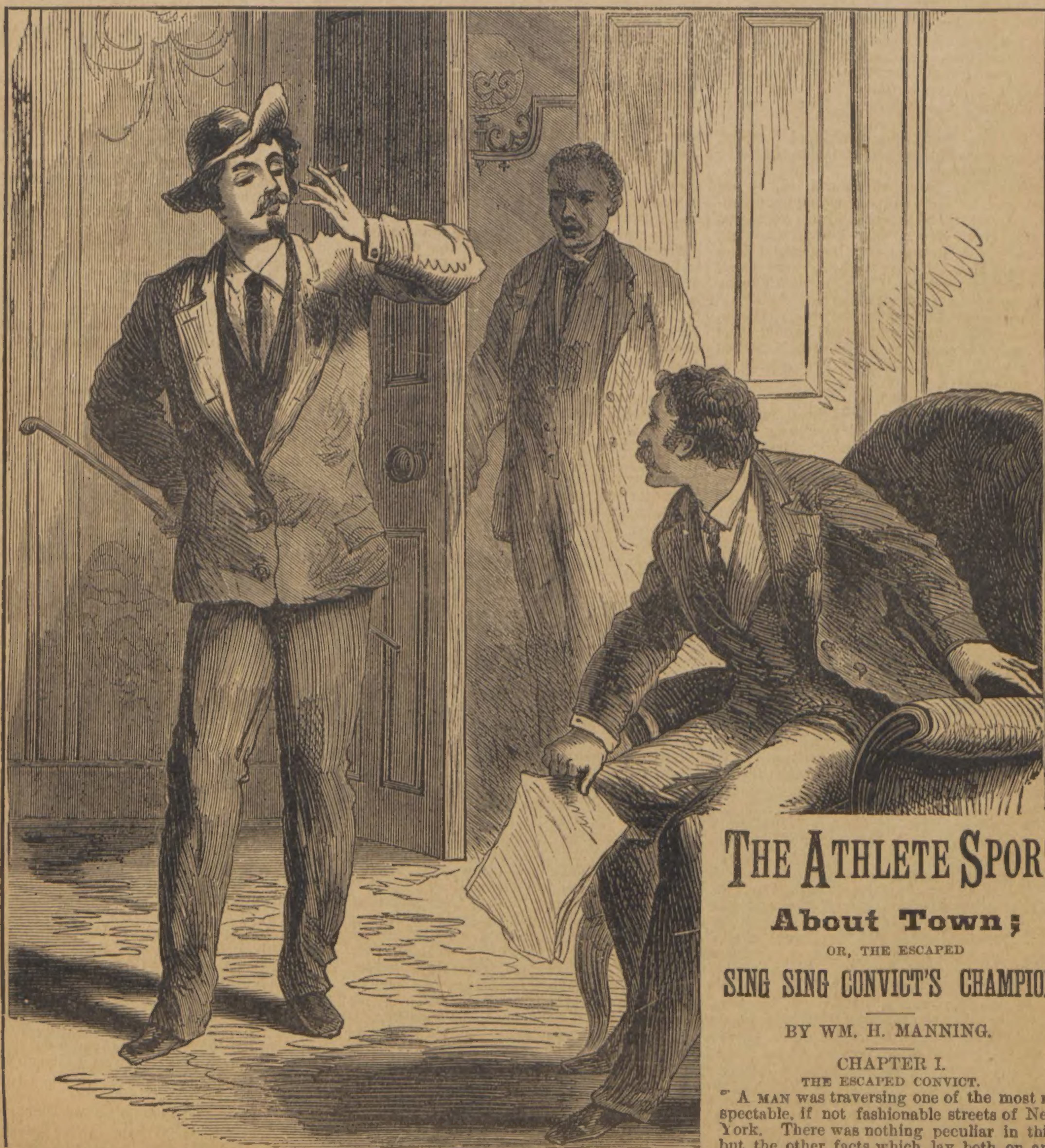
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THE ATHLETE SPORT

About Town;

OR, THE ESCAPED

SING SING CONVICT'S CHAMPION.

BY WM. H. MANNING.

CHAPTER I.

THE ESCAPED CONVICT.

"A MAN was traversing one of the most respectable, if not fashionable streets of New York. There was nothing peculiar in this, but the other facts which lay both on and below the surface were notable.

"MR. DETECTIVE, WHAT WILL YOU GIVE TO LEARN WHO KILLED DANNY FOX?"

The man was young, and not ill-looking, but his appearance was not then inviting. He was one to remind an observer of a half-famished dog, in some respects. His attire was poor, slouchy and fast going to decay; the deep pallor of his face was set off by a black beard of a week's growth, making the effect exceedingly unpleasant, and his step was weak and slow.

He paused by a street lamp and leaned against it, sighing wearily.

"Where am I going?" he muttered.

"Where can I go?"

He looked around, and then a wan and bitter smile crossed his face. On either side of the street were fine houses; the abodes of those who had money at their command.

"All are provided for except me," he continued. "The crumbs of the table in any of these places would be a boon to me. I am hungry—yes, yes; I realize that, but could I eat if I had the means? I am sick, desperately sick!"

His hand was pressed to his forehead.

"A thousand devils seem to be tearing me there!" he added. "I suspect worse is coming. If I am not flat on my back in another day I shall be surprised. Where shall I then lie? Who would give me bed or blanket? Who would do good to Cassius Rand, the unfortunate?"

The question was pitiful in the extreme. The darkness of night was over the City of New York, and the doors had been closed. They had shut the fortunate in, the unfortunate out. Cassius Rand had no place to lay his head, and sickness and hunger were upon him.

Two city dogs, lean, lank and homely, skulked past him, and he smiled again in the same bitter way.

"They are better off than I. They are homeless, but each has a friend and companion. In all the wide world I have none, and in this great city nobody knows me even casually. A stranger—a stranger and ill—Merciful Heaven! how my head worries me! It whirls, it seems as if it were about to be rent asunder. I am sick, desperately sick!"

No one could doubt the assertion. His intensely black hair and beard would have had an olive complexion to match if he had been well. Now, his pallor was not to be misunderstood.

He suddenly aroused.

"I must move on. I can keep my feet but a little longer; I must find some place where I can lie down to—what? Rest? Perhaps. More likely, to die."

He resumed his weary, uncertain pace. Reaching the avenue at the end of the block he turned northward, but had gone only a few paces when he noticed an open space in the line of buildings. One of the structures had been torn down, and its successor had not been put up.

The open space showed him the back yards of the houses, and he had an idea. Lacking a better resort he determined to enter there and lie on whatever he found. It would possibly be no more than the ground, but he felt unable to keep his feet longer.

Being a stranger in New York he was not aware that most of the back yards were impassable except by climbing over high fences. He saw this now, but the way to advance for awhile was here open, on account of certain repairs to some of the fences, and he had gone some little distance before he was checked.

Then he paused.

"I couldn't climb that fence if I would, and I see no reason why I should. As well lie down here as anywhere else."

He looked at the house nearest to him. Lights showed from two of the rear windows.

"Home of luxury and happiness! And I am a nameless wanderer. Fate does not deal cards fairly in this world—But why do I repine? What I want is a place to lie down and die—no more."

He would have sought such a place on the flagging of the yard, but an open window attracted his attention. It led to the house, and the room to which it was the entering point showed no light. His head was growing more and more light and erratic, and it struck him that it would be little less than bliss to get inside and lie down on the carpeted floor.

Determining to try it, he went on and suc-

ceeded without trouble. With a little climbing he was in the back parlor, with darkness and silence around him.

A feeling of deep satisfaction was his then, and he cared not, or, rather, thought not of the fact that he was a house-breaker. His only worry was lest he should be seen and dislodged from his position of rest, and this led him to seek position behind a tall screen which he found even in the semi-gloom. It had been before placed in front of a lounge, and on this Cassius Rand sunk with a sigh of relief.

"Here I can rest," he murmured. "This is bliss—But my head is wretchedly painful; it is all wrong."

It was all wrong; he would not have thought of entering the house as he had if it had been different.

Calmly ignoring the peculiarities of his situation, he settled down more fully and tried to get a position where he could get a little of comfort. This did not seem easy, and he muttered and groaned slightly at times. Singular situation, yet, with the screen in front of him as a cover if a servant came to close the window, there really seemed a possibility, then, that his bold scheme, conceived by a disordered mind, would work well enough to give him a place of rest for the night.

Minutes passed—nearly half an hour.

There was a rustling sound, and the intruder saw a gleam of light from the hall, and then a young woman. She entered quietly, and then lighted the gas with the match she had borne in her hand.

Cassius Rand watched her with dull interest. He noted that she was well dressed. No servant she, but one of the family, and beautiful at that. He was not in a mood to care for beauty, and he wished she would go. It was near bedtime: she must soon act thus, and he would be left alone.

This was his thought, but he was so indifferent to the situation, and the possible consequences of his rashness, that he did not assume a position other than that of repose he had first taken.

As coolly as if he were one of the family he lay on the lounge, but he improved the chance offered by the edge of the screen and took in all there was to be seen.

The young lady had come with a definite purpose, and she went to the bureau and proceeded to examine some article of fancy work which she had left there before. Five minutes passed—peaceful moments which gave no clue to the approaching storm. A change was at hand, however, and it came with startling swiftness when it came at all.

There was a slight scraping sound by the window. The lady looked up. Then she recoiled quickly.

A man had bounded into the room with the agility of a cat and the suddenness of the lightning.

He stood before her then, his arms stretched out toward her, his face pale and his breath coming in gasps.

"For God's sake, save me!" he cried.

"Ah!"

It was a mere exhalation of breath on her part; she was too much frightened to speak to any purpose. She had lost her own color, and her hand pressed to her breast seemed to be there to prevent her fast-throbbing heart from leaping out as the man had leaped in.

"Well, I'll be quartered!" muttered Cassius Rand from his cover.

Even in his mood he found room for surprise. The fresh intruder was so striking that he awakened wonder and many other feelings on Rand's part—he was bewildered by his follower in lawless entrance.

The new-comer was clad in a long coat when he first appeared, but he had thrown it aside, and he now stood revealed in the striped dress of a convict! With this attire, and his cropped hair and three days' beard, he presented an appearance not only new to Cassius Rand, but singularly out of place in that home of refinement, one would say.

The new intruder did not let his words die away after his first appeal; he added to it. Still holding out his hands, he exclaimed:

"Save me, save me. I am in desperate danger; I am hunted like a dog. Save me; save me!"

The girl began to make a gain in one way; she realized the situation in part, if not wholly. This, however, did not give her

freedom from dismay; it seemed to increase it.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded, tremulously.

"I seek safety."

"Why do you seek it here?"

"Because I know not where else to go. You know me—surely, you know me, Irena?"

"Yes," she muttered, as if uneasily.

"I am Danny Fox; you can't have forgotten me. You knew me when I was a free man, happy and prominent—"

"Yes, and I heard of your arrest and conviction for crime!" she retorted.

"The result of a moment of madness."

"If you sinned in haste, you may have repented at leisure, but that does not help you—Why are you here—here, and in such a garb?"

"I have escaped from Sing Sing!" he cried.

"Escaped?"

"Yes."

"Then your term has not expired?"

He drew his hand feverishly over his striped suit.

"Do you think I would have these things on if I were free from the clutches of the law, legally? No, no; I am not free. I have left Sing Sing by means of a trick; I am an escaped convict."

Rapidly, passionately he spoke, and with a manner which told of fear which amounted to panic. An escaped convict he might be, but he was not now showing the nerve which had enabled him to get clear. The grim shadow of the Law fell on his pathway, and he was in positive terror and fright.

The girl he had called Irena seemed to be in a mood scarcely less alarmed; but there was that in her manner which told that she thought only of herself; she exhibited no pity for Danny Fox.

"Why are you here?" she repeated.

"I am a fugitive, I say—"

"Yes, but Alexander Fox—"

"My brother is out of town."

"You had other boon companions."

"I dared not go to them now, lest they should not be faithful to me in this crisis."

"What do you want?"

"Protection, pity, shelter."

"Do you expect me to give these to you?"

"Will you do nothing for an old friend?"

"I was your friend once," she admitted, "but it was before I knew you well. I know you now; I cannot help you; you will have to go away!"

CHAPTER II.

THE FUGITIVE'S FORTUNES.

DANNY Fox uttered a cry of dismay as he heard the last words.

"No, no!" he implored, "do not say that! My case is desperate, and I must have a hiding place."

"New York is large," the girl coldly reminded.

"Given time to prepare I could find shelter with others, but I can do nothing now until I see my brother. He will not return until morning, and I cannot roam the streets until then. Irena, I must, I must have shelter here until to-morrow. In Sing Sing I was known as Convict 2,009. Here I am a man. Give me shelter!"

"Do you know in whose house you are?"

"That of Robertson Payne, your father."

"What other man lives here?"

"Your uncle, Chesterham Payne."

"What is he?"

"One of the police commissioners."

"And you would ask shelter under his roof?"

"I know he is a high police official, but necessity knows no law; it may be risky, but there is no other way for me. But do you think I intend to take him into my confidence? No, no; not by any means. Chesterham Payne is a severe officer, and he would give me no pity; he would promptly hand me over to the police. Irena, you must hide me, and you must keep it secret from all others in the house."

"Must?"

The word was spoken with severity, and Danny Fox could not help understanding it. Fresh dismay seized upon him, and he dropped on his knees at her feet. His pale

face was uplifted, and all the pathos and agony of terror was there imprinted.

"Mercy, mercy!" he almost wailed. "I was a life prisoner at Sing Sing, and it was a living death. Do not compel me to go back to that living death. Save me, save me!"

His abject misery softened her a little.

"You should have thought of this before you committed the crime which sent you to prison."

"I did not think of it then, and now I can think only of my awful situation. Pity me!"

"You went to prison with your hands red with the blood of a fellow-man. Did you pity him?"

"I have been obliged to atone in deepest bitterness."

"Has it brought the dead to life?"

"You are merciless, merciless! I beg of you, I implore you, put not this sorrow upon me. Rather would I die than return to Sing Sing."

"I see no hope."

"Pity me!"

"In a certain way I do pity you, but my duty is clear. I must summon my father and my uncle."

"No, no!"

"It must be so. I will not be a party to any such act as this, nor one to harbor a malefactor. I will—Ah! there is a step on the stairs; some one is coming. Prepare, for my duty is clear."

Danny Fox bounded to his feet. His eyes glowed with strange, unnatural brightness.

"What will you do?" he demanded, wildly.

"Call that other person in."

"Then I will tell of the past."

"Coward!"

"I will tell all, and I can prove enough to damn you. Think twice; it will go hard with you if the whole story comes out. Ay, and what of the fact that I am here now, with you? Who knows I came by chance, unknown to you? Will not the fact that I am here serve to tell that you are still my warm friend? Will it not add much to the story of the past? Yes, it will tell against you, and the whole city will ring with the news that Irena Payne sheltered the escaped convict. Would you have that story told?"

He grasped her arm with fierceness like his own rapid speech, and this, together with the still audible sound of steps, sent terror to Irena's heart. She was not in a mood to weigh his words, nor see in what degree they were correct—she only knew she was alarmed at the prospect of having Danny Fox found there with her.

"Go, go!" she almost breathlessly implored.

"Hide me!"

"Hide you?"

"Yes, there must be a refuge, if only for a moment. Do not let me be found now, with you!"

He had seen how he could touch her, and he was using the weapon to the limit.

"You can't stay here through the night."

"A minute may be enough. Show me a place."

Irena was in a panic. If she had been able to think clearly she would have been wise enough to meet the danger at once, but she was not. Instead, she yielded to the cunning insinuations and did the worst possible thing. She hurriedly opened the closet door, and convict 2,009 hastened to the cover.

He was none too soon. He had barely pulled the door after him when the hall door was opened and another person entered. He was a man of about forty-eight years, tall and powerful of frame and equally powerful of face. A man born to be a leader, and a strict one, even a casual observer would say at first sight.

Irena knew hers would be a tell-tale face then, and she had the presence of mind to turn partially away. The new-comer smiled slightly.

"Playing the hermit?" he inquired, lightly.

"Yes."

"I was looking for you."

"Looking for me, Uncle Chesterham?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Only as a comforter, my dear. I have

just come home from an unusually trying meeting of the Board of Police Commissioners. I am tired of being one of them. When my term expires I shall drop out."

Irena cared nothing for this, just then, but her uncle had seated himself, and she felt it necessary to say something.

"You give good satisfaction."

"So I am told," replied Chesterham Payne, yawning. "A public official with a conscience generally does, but he pays for his devotion to duty by having severe trials. I did not come to speak of that, though. Your father is busy, and I want to be comforted. First, however, I have news for you. Put your mind back a few years and see if you remember a certain young man named Danny Fox."

Irena trembled under the weight of this question, but she managed to answer with a degree of composure.

"I remember him."

"Then you recollect that he was sent to prison for life for murder?"

"He—he killed a man," falteringly amended Irena, with her mind on the person in the closet.

"The jury called it murder. Well, this Fox has escaped."

"Escaped?" weakly murmured the girl.

"Escaped from Sing Sing."

There was no reply, and Mr. Payne went on after a pause:

"He has fled nobody knows where, but, of course, suspicion rests on this city, it being the best of all places in which to hide, and watch is being kept for him now. I was not aware of this until I was on my way home, nor was the police. They know it now, and if Fox has not already gained some refuge, he can't set foot on the streets without a good chance of being detected, seized and sent back to his life home."

"Why can't they let him go?" faintly asked Irena.

"My dear, don't be sympathetic just because we once knew the fellow. His ability as an athlete gained him entrance to our circle for awhile, but his reign was brief. I have not forgotten that Robertson Payne has a standing threat to kill Fox if he gets a chance."

"My father would not do that!" cried Irena.

"He threatened it. There are some things about Fox's crime which you do not know, but things of such a nature that your father and I were deeply interested in the case. The cause of our interest did not concern the case, itself, so we said nothing, and did not appear at the trial, but we were none the less interested. Interested? Why, we were all bound up in it."

"This is new to me."

"Of course, my dear. We always kept it away from you, as it did not seem right to worry you. You knew Danny Fox, and the disgrace of knowing such a knave was enough. The scoundrel!"

Mr. Payne spoke with such force and feeling that Irena again looked nervously toward the closet.

"That is now past history," she said.

"It may not be if Fox is seen. Robertson Payne swore to kill the fellow if he ever had a chance, and I was not less bitter. Instead," the speaker added, "if your father or I get eyes on the escaped convict, I am not sure but murder will be done."

"Oh! uncle, remember you are a police commissioner!" cried Irena.

"I do not forget it."

"Then do not talk such nonsense."

"Then let Danny Fox keep out of sight of Robertson Payne and myself. I don't want the Payne name stained with crime, but it may be a stain of blood if we see Fox."

"Uncle, I will not hear such language!" declared Irena. "You are a high police official in New York, and this sort of talk is most intemperate. I'll not hear more, and to prevent it I am going to send you off to bed. I banish you from this room."

She was greatly worried about the man in the closet, and eager to get rid of the more pressing danger, so she assumed an air of playfulness which she was far from feeling, and pulled gently at his arm.

He laughed and rose.

"I obey your decree. Don't linger here yourself long, Irena, but get to bed early. Good-night."

He went into the hall, and then, still thinking of Danny Fox, opened the street door and passed out to the stoop. It so happened that another gentleman was just on the point of entering.

"Back so soon, Bob?" was the commissioner's greeting.

"Yes. Is there anything more about Fox?"

"No."

"Will he escape them?"

"I think not."

"Your detectives are not perfect."

"They are human, but they are enough to catch Fox, I think. If he is still at large in the morning, I will myself put Nicholas Blackwood on his trail."

"Napoleon Nick is the man for the job."

"Somebody must find Fox."

"Would that I could be the one!" cried Robertson Payne, his eyes glittering. "Then I should have a chance to keep my threat of killing the fellow."

"Pooh, pooh!"

"But you feel just as I do, Ches," persisted the elder brother. "I would not risk Fox with you, if I liked the man."

"You may be right," admitted Chesterham. "We would like—"

"Hush! I thought I heard the rustle of a dress inside. It may be Irena. Say no more; I would not have her hear this talk."

Robertson Payne had been out to do some trifling errand. He had nothing especial to say further, but he remained with his brother for perhaps fifteen minutes. Then he said good-night and passed into the house.

Chesterham lingered on the stoop.

Irena's father did not go up-stairs, but opened the parlor door.

"Dark and silent!" he murmured. "I am all alone here."

Commissioner Payne looked at the stars and meditated.

"Irena seemed reluctant to have me say too much against Danny Fox," he thought. "Can it be she feels for the knave? Beyond doubt she did once have a tender feeling for him, but it seemed to vanish. Can it be the proverbial faithfulness of women has caused her to keep his memory in fond regard? No, no; she would not be so foolish. She is a Payne. Now that I think of it, too, I had some cause to think her love—if such it was—had turned to hate long ago. Let me hope so."

His thoughts then dwelt solely on the escaped convict.

"He must be hunted down" muttered the commissioner, with energy.

Another pause.

"If all is unsolved in the morning, the job of hunting him shall be given to the Detective of Destiny. That will settle it, for Napoleon Nick never scores a miss. Again, he is Irena's friend, and he will be all the more zealous when he knows we are all interested. It will not be long before Mr. Danny Fox is back in Sing Sing, where he belongs. It will be good riddance, but I would really like to be shut up somewhere with him for awhile ere the prison-doors close on him again."

A few moments more the commissioner lingered on the stoop; then he re-entered the house, closed the door and looked at his watch.

"Half-past ten," he murmured, "it is not late; I will read awhile in the parlor before going up-stairs."

He opened the parlor door and entered.

CHAPTER III.

A DEAD MAN.

ON the following morning Moss, a domestic in the house of Mr. Robertson Payne, rose as was her custom, dressed and then went down-stairs to do the work she was in the habit of doing every morning.

First of all she entered the parlor to open the windows to air the room. This promised to be a success, for the breeze came in with a gentle rustle of curtains and cloths. Then Mary moved the sliding door which connected the room with the back parlor. She entered the latter room. There, too, she opened the windows.

Thus far all had been according to the usual custom, and she supposed she would then put the room to rights just as she had done every morning for many weeks.

She went about it with the vim of a young and healthy woman, and whirled sundry chairs into their proper place from where they had been left by the family the night before.

In due time she approached the place where the ornamental screen stood before the lounge. Mary had always looked upon this screen with contempt. Born and bred where people cared nothing for refinement or privacy, it had irritated her to think there were people so foolish, as she considered it, that they needed privacy when they took a mid-day nap. Now, she did not look upon the screen with any more of charitable spirit.

"Bother the thing!" she muttered.

She seized the screen and whirled it away from its position. On similar occasions before she had always raced it into a corner as if it were a rebellious thing to be punished for something or other, but this time she suddenly stopped short.

"Mercy!" she gasped.

Much to her surprise the lounge was not vacant. Extended upon it was the form of a man!

Two things she quickly noticed—the man was a stranger to her, and his face was very pale.

"Why, dear me!" she exclaimed.

The man did not move, and she had time to study. It soon dawned upon her that the presence of the man was very irregular. None of the Payne family would have allowed a guest to go to sleep there when they had so many comfortable rooms on the floors above. Then why was he there?

The open window suggested that he was an intruder, but this notion was speedily made trivial by something else. Besides the pallor of the person's face she noticed that his eyes were wide open and staring—a most unnatural-looking face it was in all ways.

A part of Mary's full color faded away, but she recovered the power of motion, and drew nearer to the stranger. She touched his nearest hand gingerly.

"Oh!"

It was a little scream of dismay and terror which escaped her lips, and then she turned and fled from the parlor as if a demon were in hostile pursuit. Her legs seemed very weak for one so robust, but she gained the floor above.

In the hall she met Irena, clad in a morning wrapper and looking calm and cool. Mary broke in on the mood with gasping utterance.

"Oh! Miss Irena!" she cried.

"What is it Mary?" asked Miss Payne, curiously.

"There's a dead man below."

"A—what?"

"A dead man."

"What do you mean?"

"There's a man on the lounge in the back parlor, cold and dead."

The story was out, and Mary could not feel that it had fallen on indifferent ears. Irena lost color, and she recoiled before the revelation. She stood staring at Mary as if she had become speechless.

"Oh! I tell the truth," added Mary, excitedly. "I went in to dust the back parlor, and there on the lounge was the man, dead."

"Dead!"

"That's what I said."

"Who is it?" quickly, feverishly asked Irena.

"I never seen him before."

"Dead on the lounge?"

"Yes, yes; that's what I said. Ain't I speaking English?"

Mary was not made of naturally nervous material, and as she began to recover her composure her native flippancy came with it.

Not so with Irena. Her fears suggested the worst as the explanation to be drawn from this news, and the best was bad enough.

"Of course," added Mary, philosophically, "you ain't turned the house into a morgue, and I can see that you don't know about it, but I do think it was mean in him to come in here to die."

"What—what did he die of?"

"Why, I don't know. Come down with me and see him."

"I go down!" cried Irena. "No, oh! no! I dare not!"

"He can't hurt you. But here comes James."

James was a man-servant, and the tale was quickly poured into his ears. He was a well-bred Englishman, and though he remained calm he was shocked.

"Dreadful! dreadful!" he murmured. "It was very poor breeding for him to do it. Very unfeeling, indeed. Wasn't New York big enough for him to die in, without intruding on us?"

"James, come down and see him," requested Mary.

"I will."

The man-servant started briskly, and Mary followed. Irena did not leave the upper hall, but bent over the banisters and listened intently. She heard exclamations from the back parlor after the servants entered, but nothing that she could understand.

Perhaps five minutes had passed when Mary came flying up the stairs. Bagerly Irena scanned her face, and it was clear that Mary had received a new shock. Her happy complacency had disappeared.

"Oh! miss!" she gasped.

"What?"

"The man has been murdered!"

"Murdered!"

"He never died naturally; he was killed by somebody."

Irena clung to the banisters to keep herself from falling. She was weak and faint.

"He was struck on the head," Mary went on, "and the blow took his life. James found the wound, and the weapon is there now; it was the cuspidor. It is broken and stained with blood. Oh! what does it mean? Of course the man was some tramp who came in secretly, but who could have killed him? It must have been somebody in this house; some of our own members. Who could have done it? It is dreadful, dreadful!—Oh!"

Mary broke off abruptly, and was just in time to catch her mistress as Irena fainted dead away. The girl held her in her own strong arms, and then her better nature was stirred by the pallid face so near her own.

"Poor dear!" she murmured, "it has been too much for her. No wonder such a thing frightened her. But what would she have done if the dead man had been somebody she knew?"

A few moments of delay, and then the servant grew practical. She lifted Irena and bore her to her room a few feet away. There she put her burden on the bed, and began to work to resuscitate her. She had without any agreement to that effect left all to James, so far as the murdered man was concerned.

She had no clew to what James might think it best to do, and she was not so situated that she could follow the course of events outside the room. Thus, the next ten minutes brought her nothing but faithful labor over her young mistress, but when she heard the front door unclose, her curiosity overcame her and she went again to the hall and looked down.

In the lower hall was a group of three men—James, Chesterham Payne and a policeman in uniform. Commissioner Payne was the calmest of the trio.

"Follow me, officer," he said to the policeman, waving his hand toward the back parlor.

"They are going in to see the dead man!" whispered Mary, to herself. "Oh! isn't it dreadful? Everybody will know all about it."

The policeman obeyed his directions and was conducted to the room in question. Once there, Mr. Payne pointed to the lounge.

"Here is your man," he coolly remarked.

"What?" cried the officer. "He has on the dress of a convict."

"Yes."

"Can it be—"

"The dead man is Danny Fox, the escaped convict about whom there has been so much talk the last night."

"But how came he here?" wonderingly asked the officer. "Your house is the last place I should have thought of seeing him. How came he here, and who killed him?"

CHAPTER IV.

MR. BLACKWOOD, DETECTIVE.

It was an hour later, and Mr. Commissioner Payne was in his private room up-

stairs when there was a knock at the door. Obeying his call the applicant opened the door, and Mr. Payne saw James.

"Well?" questioned Mr. Payne, with a trace of irritation.

"A gentleman to see you, sir," explained James, advancing with a card extended.

The commissioner read the name.

"Nicholas Blackwood!" he muttered.

"Yes, sir," replied James; "it is the great detective."

"Tell him I am not in."

"But I have told him already you were in, sir."

Payne's face darkened.

"Why did you do that?"

"Why, sir, Mr. Blackwood has always been a welcome guest, and I supposed he would be now."

"Humph!"

Mr. Payne twirled the card and then inquired:

"So you told him I was in?"

"Begging your pardon, I did, sir."

"Very well."

The commissioner rose, passed out of the room and went down the stairs. James was too well bred to comment, but he retained the privilege of thinking. He thought now.

"It's singular that a man always as welcome as Mr. Blackwood should not be welcome now. Mr. Payne looked annoyed and almost agitated. We seem to have stumbled on an era of mysteries."

The commissioner went straight to the parlor. The caller was there—a man whose personal appearance put him out of the order of ordinary men at first sight. He was not over thirty years of age, but he had the settled, firm look of one much older. With a generous-sized, athletic figure he united a strong face and marked, but not unpleasant, keenness of eyes.

This was Nicholas Blackwood, the detective whose fame had grown to surprising limits for one of his years, and who had won the title of "The Detective of Destiny."

He rose and put on the sympathetic expression of the man in place of the business look of the detective.

"Mr. Payne, I was passing, and I thought I would drop in. I had heard of what had happened here."

"Yes?" replied Mr. Payne, not over pleasantly.

"I saw an officer outside."

"Who?"

"Sergeant Morlon."

The commissioner made no answer.

"Mr. Payne, I am amazed by this latest news," added Blackwood. "I had before heard of Danny Fox's escape, but not for a moment had I thought it possible the rest of the trail would be found here."

"Fox selected this place to die!" curtly returned Payne.

"Wasn't he murdered?"

"So they say."

"Is the mystery of his death solved?"

"No. He was hit over the head with a cuspidor. The blow killed him. A little blood came from the wound, but not much; it was the shock that did the deed. His skull is fractured, and the brain failed to stand the blow. That is all there is to it, for we have no means of knowing who struck him."

"Was he seen about the premises by any one, last night?"

"No."

"Have you questioned all?"

"Yes."

"How do you think he came here?"

"By entering secretly through a window of the back parlor. We have been careless about closing it. Now, with repairs going on near, and the demolished building on the avenue affording entrance to the interior of the block, we were especially careless. The window should have been fastened; it was not, and the way was open for Danny Fox to enter. He did it; he died here. That is the whole story."

"He must have known you were a police commissioner. Why should he come here when he was a hunted man?"

"Chiefly because he supposed nobody would think of looking for him here, I should say."

"That is possible; it would be a cunning step. Do you suspect your servants of having killed him?"

"Certainly not."

"Somebody did it, and who else could it have been?"

"That is a mystery, Blackwood. It does not follow that it was any inmate of this house, however. Fox may have had somebody with him when he intruded here, you know."

"If that was so, why didn't he look to his companion for shelter, instead of trying his fortunes here?"

Commissioner Payne looked annoyed at this practical question from the detective, but his reply was ready enough.

"If the companion was of a mood to kill him, he was not the man with whom to seek shelter."

"Carrying out that line of argument, he was not the man to be with at all. Mr. Payne, we may as well abandon the supposed companion, and seek right here for the slayer."

"Most decidedly we will not!" declared the commissioner with energy; then he suddenly paused and more calmly added: "I am not logical; overlook the slip of a mind that should be judicial, perhaps. All things are possible, but I do not think any member of my household could possibly have had a hand in it. I have studied it a good bit, and the only result is that it's a complete mystery."

"I will solve it," quietly remarked Blackwood.

"How?"

"By taking up the trail and learning who killed Danny Fox."

Again Payne looked annoyed.

"I prefer to have you continue on the Mallett case."

"I have completely finished it, and run the whole thing to earth."

"Well, there is the Paxley affair."

"All fallen through by the confession of the accused man. In brief, I am now wholly at liberty, and, what is more, the superintendent has sent me here to take up the case of Danny Fox. He said he knew you would be glad to have me do the work."

If Mr. Chesterham Payne was glad, he did not give visible evidence of the fact. The previous evening he had declared that "Napoleon Nick"—Mr. Blackwood—must have the job of running Danny Fox to earth, because Nick was so shrewd. Now, he seemed anything but eager to have the great detective on the work at all.

Why was it?

After a pause he spoke quietly:

"Of course, if you are at liberty, you can take up the trail, but it seems a pity that a dead convict should monopolize your time when more important things may come up. Let it rest, however; you can go on and try to learn how Fox died."

"Has the coroner arrived?"

"Not yet."

"And the body?"

"Lies where it was found, in the back parlor."

"I would like to see it."

"You shall. You can go in there and look the scene over as much as you please. Now, I have an engagement which will take me away for at least half an hour. With your permission I will go and keep it, and you may await my return. I shall be curious to ascertain what you discover or guess at."

"Very well."

"My brother, Robertson Payne, and Miss Payne, are both up-stairs. Should you desire anything which the servants cannot furnish, you can have aid from the family."

If the commissioner had felt reluctant to have Napoleon Nick go on the case he had for the time abandoned all coldness, and his manner was quite cordial.

Blackwood said he understood, and then, when Mr. Payne had gone out, the detective entered the back parlor. The body was still on the sofa. It had a guardian in the shape of a policeman, but this man had taken to the balcony, and the room was practically untenanted.

The detective looked at everything—the victim, the wound, the room, the floor and the broken cuspidor, and, last of all, the yard. Acting on the belief that Danny Fox had come in by that way he thought footprints might be found, but he saw none.

There was absolutely no sign left but the dead man and the instrument of death.

Blackwood finally paused by the body.

"This is the end of your career," he mused.

"You were a man of some consequence in the peculiar circle in which you moved until you got in the clutches of the law. When you went wrong all went wrong with you, and this is what crime has brought you to. Before this time you were a bald-faced criminal, but you are now a mystery."

Pausing for a moment, the speaker then added:

"Why did you come here, of all places? Chesterham Payne is a high officer of law. It is almost beyond belief that you should seek his home when you wanted security. Why did you do it?"

The still lips could not answer, and Nick was left to wonder.

"Having come here, who should kill you? If it had been done in self-defense, or in the heat of passion, an honest person would have confessed the fact as to the honest way out of it. There has been no confession, so it looks like deliberate murder."

The detective had rarely been more puzzled. An escaped convict slain in the home of a police commissioner! It was strange, indeed.

When Blackwood turned away he was about to re-enter the front room. The sliding doors were nearly closed—so near it that the aperture would not have been noticed by any casual survey. He inserted his hand in the crack to push the door back and then stopped short.

A man was in the parlor—a stranger to him. He stood still, looking at him with half unconscious sharpness.

The man was not such a person as he would naturally look for in that house. He was about thirty years of age, and most athletic of build. Tall and heavy, he had the powerful arms and wide shoulders that one naturally associates with the ancient gladiators of the Old World. He dressed with some pretensions to style and cost, but in bad taste. His smooth face was red and heavy, and he looked very cheap in spite of his show of good clothes.

"Not a guest," thought Nick. "It must be somebody to see Payne on police business."

The door which led to the hall suddenly opened, and Nick grew more interested. A lady had entered, as if to deny the last theory.

It was Irena Payne.

CHAPTER V.

THE CONVICT'S CHAMPION.

"SHE does not know this person is here," thought Detective Blackwood.

He knew Irena quite well—knew her to be of fastidious tastes and good associates, and it seemed reasonable that he should arrive at such a decision. All men make mistakes now and then.

Irena did not look well. Her face was still very pale, and she seemed to have grown thin and haggard since morning broke.

The parlor had been somewhat darkened since Mary Moss aired it in the early morning, and for a moment Irena looked around without seeing the athletic sport in the corner. He, however, rose and stood before her.

"It's me!" was his abrupt greeting.

She recoiled a little.

"You?" she replied, blankly.

"Yes, me. Don't you know me?"

The stranger stepped into stronger light, and she did know him then. Again she recoiled, and this time with an appearance of alarm. Even paler grew her fair face.

"Yes, it's me," added the caller. "I didn't send any name, for I thought you might not come down if I did. Miss Payne, I am here on business, and I won't lose any time."

He spoke in a deep, husky voice, with every evidence of intense feeling, and Napoleon Nick was surprised to see that Irena was strongly agitated. After all, she knew the man, and—she seemed to be afraid of him. The detective did not intend to act the spy, but something chained him to the spot then.

The stranger added in a sharply-accented voice:

"What have you done with Danny?"

"Nothing," replied Irena.

"The papers say he has been murdered under your roof."

"He was certainly killed here," she admitted.

"Murdered?"

"So they say."

"Girl, this is your work!" cried the visitor, hotly.

"Mine?"

"Yes."

"You are mad."

"I say that you killed Danny!"

"You are mad," she repeated.

"He knew I was out of town, and when he failed to get my help, he came here for shelter—"

Irena was still agitated, but something like spirit flashed out as she interrupted:

"How do you know that?"

"What other object should bring him here? When he got to the city his one thought, of course, was a refuge. I know he sought me; he learned I was absent from town, so he sought the next best shelter, or what seemed to be that. Why should he come here except for shelter?"

"Why should he expect shelter here?"

"Because you were his friend—"

"Enough of that!" cried Irena. "I knew him once—more's the pity—but it was long ago. I did not even know him by sight of late. He come here for shelter? Alexander Fox, you are mad!"

Napoleon Nick started. He never had heard of Alexander Fox, but the similarity of names quickly suggested that the man was a relative of the dead convict.

The caller moving quickly forward, grasped the girl's arm.

"Woman," he exclaimed, "I say you killed Danny!"

"It is false!"

"He came here to be safe; he found his death. Who else should kill him? Would a servant do it? Never! It was you, or your father, or uncle. Both hated Danny because he had dared to care for you, and I am well aware that Robertson Payne swore to kill Danny at sight."

"Hush, hush!" nervously requested Irena.

"If he has not kept the threat, somebody else of his family has. The deed lies between yourself, your father and your uncle."

"My uncle is a police commissioner, sir."

"I don't care if he is the Mayor of New York. Men do not lose temper and passion when they take high office. Danny's death lies between you three."

"Why should we kill him?"

"Hatred or fear explains it."

"Fear?"

"Ay, fear! What of the past? Danny was a secretive person—he was as gentle as a woman where you were concerned, for he loved you and you claimed to love him, so he held you higher than any one else—and even to me he did not tell all that happened in the past. I do not know all now, but I do know that when you threw him over because he was not considered good enough for you, there was a history back of it you did not want known. Danny was too chivalrous to tell it, too. Now you have killed him to hide that secret!"

"You are mad, mad!"

"Girl, I will learn that secret; his death shall not save you!" declared the athlete, hotly.

"Mad, mad!" repeated Irena, but she trembled painfully.

"Bitter must have been the situation to you since he was slain, ay, murdered, to hide the secret!"

"He was not."

"I say he was. Nothing else can explain how he died here. Who should murder him but for that reason? There was no other reason; I have called the turn. Danny is dead, and by your hand."

Fox suddenly tightened his hold on her arm.

"He is dead," was the addition, "but I still live—live for vengeance! Woman, the whole world shall know your secret. I have the threads in my hand, and I will seek the full explanation. I will learn the secret, and publish it to the whole world!"

Irena's endurance had reached an end.

She suddenly dropped into a chair, and appeared to be on the point of fainting.

This state of affairs had due effect on Alexander Fox. He was not used to fainting women, and he seemed to grow uneasy.

"I have spoken," he pursued, hurriedly, "and now I will go. I do not suppose there is much use of asking it, but if you want to talk with me, you can write me at the club quarters. If it was not you who murdered Danny, you have only to let me know, reveal the real murderer, help justice to reach its end, and I will save your secret. If it was not you who killed Danny I don't want to harm you, but the real murderer must be found. Danny must be avenged."

Irena said nothing, but there was full consciousness in the gaze she continued on Alexander.

That person had grown uneasy without exactly knowing why. With his physical strength he need not have feared any one man in combat, but he felt ill at ease—perhaps he remembered he was in the house of the police commissioner, and acting a part which might land him in jail.

He abruptly moved toward the door.

"Remember what I've said!" he said, significantly.

Turning, he passed out of the parlor, and the clanging of the street door quickly told that he was gone from the house. The sound brought Irena quickly to her feet. She stood in an attitude which told of both deep agitation and fear.

"Just Heaven!" she gasped, "what has come to pass?"

A moment she stood thus, and then she wheeled and fled from the room. Her feet sounded on the stairs for a brief time; then all that remained of the recent interview was the detective by the door.

He stood where he had first taken position, and now was slow to move. His hand strayed to his forehead, and he rubbed at the surface as if to banish some pain.

"I don't understand," he murmured. "Is this Irena Payne, the woman I have—"

A word trembled on his lips—the word "loved,"—but he did not utter it. Instead, he ceased to speak, and went to a seat in the parlor.

If he had said that he loved Irena the statement would not have been strictly correct. He had known her for months; he had respected and liked her, and the mood was liable to ripen into love. So he had thought, but he was not sure of much of anything now.

For perhaps five minutes he was purely the man, but the weakness passed and he became again the detective, cool, business-like, blind to all but duty. He had no real love to fight down, if events should show love to be an error.

Ignoring his liking for Irena, he studied on the situation. The result of the study he was careful not to put into words.

Presently Chesterham Payne returned, and, at about the same time, his brother Robertson came down from the upper floor. Nick talked with both for some time. Both asserted that during the night they had seen nothing and heard nothing of Danny Fox, nor had they heard any suspicious sounds around the house.

Next, the detective questioned the servants, and with the same result. According to all accounts the murder had been done so silently that no sound whatever betrayed the doer of the deed.

Blackwood sat with the brothers after the servants had been dismissed.

"It may be," he said, calmly, "that we must look for the slayer among the evil associates of the man. Danny Fox was of low life; he must have had low associates. Possibly one of them saw him on the street, followed him here and settled a grudge summarily."

Nick did not think so, but he wanted to approach a certain point gradually.

"Possibly," agreed Commissioner Payne, doubtfully.

"Do you remember anything about Danny Fox's associations and life?"

"But little."

"He was not in our line," added Robertson Payne.

"I must look up his history."

Commissioner Payne toyed with his watch-chain for a moment, and then remarked:

"I have seen Fox before he was a criminal—at least, before he was known to be such. One summer we, my brother and myself, spent a portion of our outing period in New Jersey. Near our quarters was a boat-house which belonged to some New Yorkers, and one of this party was Fox. We saw him there—"

"Only casually," put in Robertson Payne, quickly.

"Yes, only casually. Still, we met him."

"But did not learn much of him?"

"No."

"He was not the kind of an associate we desired," sharply added the commissioner's brother.

"True," agreed Chesterham Payne.

Blackwood asked no more questions. He had given them a chance to tell all they knew about Danny Fox. Either they knew but little, or they did not care to say anything as to what they did know. He did not try to say anything decisive.

"One member of your household I have not seen," he added. "I refer to Miss Payne."

"It would be useless; she can tell nothing of last night's affair," hurriedly replied Irena's father.

CHAPTER VI.

BUSINESS BEGINS WITH THE DETECTIVE.

NAPOLEON NICK nodded slightly.

"Of course I understand that," he answered, "yet it is a due form to inquire of all inmates of the house. I am here now as a detective."

"Nevertheless, as a man you can take my word," retorted Robertson Payne, quickly.

"You are wrong, brother," put in Commissioner Payne. "Mr. Blackwood can not be hampered in the discharge of his duty by anything frivolous, and we must aid, not embarrass him. Allow him to see Irena, by all means, for, though it will amount to nothing, the usual course will be followed. Shall I ring?"

Irena's father hesitated; then sulkily replied:

"Yes."

Chesterham rung, a servant appeared, and was sent to Irena. Then Nicholas talked quietly with his companions, and all seemed to be going very placidly. Really, the detective was observant and thoughtful to a marked degree. He knew he was abreast of a mystery of no small kind. He was acute enough to know that both of his companions were ill at ease and disturbed by his connection with the case. He would have been dull, too, if he had not suspected that they were holding back a good deal which would interest him.

What was it?

Did it merely concern the past?

Or was it also connected with the murder, itself?

Nicholas Blackwood would willingly have staked a good deal that they did not have guilty knowledge of the killing of Danny Fox, yet he was too old in his business to let his convictions on such points play any part. The men most trusted and esteemed in the world had fallen before them. The Paynes were only human. He did not accuse them even mentally, but he proposed to investigate before he cleared them of knowledge of more than they had told.

Miss Payne came.

Calm, composed and natural of look she entered the parlor. Clearly, it was no surprise to see the detective there, and she greeted him like an old friend.

This done, she added sadly:

"This is a dreadful business, Mr. Blackwood."

"A passing annoyance, it is true."

"Really, the convict should have found a different place to die, I think. I don't say this unkindly, but it does seem so."

"Probably he did not intend to die when he came here."

"He did die."

"And mysteriously," added the Detective of Destiny.

"Dreadfully so."

"I suppose you heard nothing out of the way during the night?"

"Nothing whatever."

"Do you know who closed the parlor for the night?"

"No."

"Somebody put out the lights, I dare say."

"I doubt if they were lighted," replied Miss Payne, sweetly. "I cannot say positively on that point, for I was not in the parlor, or back parlor after dinner at six."

"Nor I," added Chesterham Payne.

"Nor I," supplemented Irena's father.

"None of the family, then, entered those rooms after dark?"

"No."

"Then the lights may not have been lighted."

"I think they were not," agreed Miss Payne.

"Did you know Danny Fox by sight?"

"We met him casually at the country quarters of the Horatius Athletic Club, some years ago," interposed Mr. Commissioner Payne. "You undoubtedly remember him, Irena, though you may not remember how he looked."

Nicholas Blackwood made a mental note. The great police dignitary had seen fit to prompt his niece!

"I remember his looks," returned Irena.

"But you did not see him around this house, last night?" pursued Nicholas.

"No," calmly replied Irena.

"Then," added the detective, lightly,

"we are left to the supposition that Convict 2,009 entered here secretly, and met his death as a reward. Since you clear your servants we must suppose the guilty party to be—"

He paused, and each of the trio of listeners leaned forward as if the quicker to catch his conclusion. He remained silent.

"Whom?" asked Robertson Payne, huskily.

"Possibly, a tramp."

"That's it; that's it!" cried Irena's father.

"A tramp came in and did it. Just like a tramp. Who else would kill such an insignificant person as this Danny Fox?"

"Kindly allow Mr. Blackwood to form his own theory, brother," requested the commissioner. "We are too much at sea to aid him until he does. All that we can do, later, will, of course, be done gladly."

"Certainly, certainly," assented Robertson.

The detective did not see that he was advancing his cause, so he prepared to go. There were mutual good words at parting, and then Nick was on the street and homeward bound.

"Decidedly odd," he thought. "I feel positive that the family are not only omitting to tell all they know, but trying to baffle me. Yet, one of the party is a police commissioner! I must imagine it all; such a man cannot be ranged against the interests of law. Still, it is very suspicious, and I must not forget that in police annals no man is above suspicion."

Beset with conflicting views the detective walked on until his home was reached. He did not care to be active in the duties of the coroner, and willingly absented himself from the slow processes of that official.

His work was not to build on the coroner's deductions, but to find evidence, himself.

Mr. Blackwood was one of the unfortunates who have to board for want of a better way of living. One of his fellow boarders was a man in his own business who had a passion for athletic sports, and him Nick at once consulted.

"What is the Horatius Athletic Club?" he asked.

"Didn't you ever hear of it?" was the answer.

"Never."

"Well, it don't rank with the top-notchers of the city, I will confess, but if you insinuated that it was a small thing, its members would get in a white heat. They know how to express themselves when angry, too. They are young men who never dreamed of wearing a claw-hammer coat; their command of languages is limited to murdering the English language, and as for the classic regions on Fifth avenue, they know it only by gazing at the architecture from the outside."

"Toughs?"

"Well, they have to abate dues, now and then, while members are sojourning at the Island or Sing Sing. Don't understand me as putting them down as regular law-breakers. They are not that; most of them

get a living in a way more or less honest; they are the pets of women who are free from vice, but, unfortunately, the whole lot were born in a very cheap rank of life, and they don't get out of it."

"I see."

"In the cheap, dowdy, rough-and-tumble, but generally honest place in life which fate allotted them to fill, they shine like bright stars. Athletics are their hobby, and they rank high. That's what the Horatius Athletic Club is."

"I can see them all from your description."

"If you want to see them at closer range I can accommodate you, though I never joined the gang. Go there, if you wish, and you will find them free with whisky—possibly, full of it, themselves."

"Interesting specimens!"

"From their point of view, they are. They have a club-house not a thousand miles from the classic Bowery, and there they hold revel when winter is on the boards. They have so-called athletic shows, and the boxing one can see there is lively, if not scientific. Such as it is, men and women alike applaud it wildly, for the girls of the set are as much interested in manly sports as the men."

"Enough! I know the species by heart. Tell me no more."

The last injunction referred only to the character of the members of the club. Nicholas took pains to learn where it was situated, and then he went further. Drawing his friend on, he got him to speak of the members, and the brother detective, warming to his subject, told of those who were expert in boxing, wrestling, sprinting, and the like.

He finally heard a familiar name.

"In things where muscle tell, nobody can compete with Alexander Fox. His record for throwing the hammer is away up; he can lift like an ox, and at wrestling he is fine."

He is chiefly known as a hammer-thrower and shot-putter, though."

In the hands of such a tutor Nick soon became charged with any amount of information concerning the Horatius Athletic Club, and nothing escaped him.

He intended to make use of it, later on.

In the afternoon he again visited the Payne residence. The coroner had removed the body of the dead convict, and there was relief thereat, but the cloud of gloom was not so easily dispelled.

Nobody had been able to shake off the shock of the tragedy.

Nicholas did not make himself too prominent, but went back to his boarding-house after a very commonplace conversation. Then he prepared for an expedition he had marked out. He wished to know more about the Fox family, and, as a first step, he intended to see at least the exterior of the building where the athletic club made its quarters.

Nine o'clock found him in front of the building.

The street was poor and dirty; the building was rusty and old. All told of a low rank in life. This the detective had expected, and he gave it but passing attention.

As he stood there one or two flashy-looking men entered the place, but the watcher judged that most of them had already gone inside, and that some sort of entertainment was under way.

He did not think of entering, and he was about to go away when he noticed a woman advance toward the place with quick steps. One look at her did not satisfy Nick. Accustomed to judge people by their actions, he marked her down as one who had some important and nerve-disturbing errand on hand. She appeared to be strung up to something which she found it hard to do.

"Heavily veiled!" muttered the watcher. "She may be black or white, yet—Why is it she looks familiar to me?"

He knitted his forehead in perplexity.

What followed amazed him. She paused by a door; she fitted a key and opened it; she turned for a moment; she passed inside and closed the door after her.

"Jupiter!" exclaimed Nick, "it is Irena Payne, and she has gone into the building of the Horatius Athletic Club!"

CHAPTER VII.

TAKING BIG RISKS.

NAPOLEON NICK had made no mistake. As the woman turned for a moment she had been the victim of a wayward puff of wind which blew her veil aside. The detective obtained a brief view of her face, and it was enough to explain why she had appeared familiar to him from the first.

Irena Payne it surely was!

The discovery furnished one of the greatest surprises of the detective's life. Although well aware that the best-appearing people were not perfect, he had been sufficiently touched by Irena's beauty and supposed goodness so that he was not now ready to admit that such a thing as he had witnessed could be.

She was of a high, if not patrician rank in life, and was lady-like and refined, while the Horatius Athletes were common and rough-and-tumble. What was she doing there? And why had she come there, to a dubious quarter of the city, alone, and at such an hour?

Nicholas was still battling with these questions when a voice rose close to his side.

"Say, boss, be you one o' them?"

Nick turned quickly. The speaker was revealed, and proved to be a small boy, exceedingly plain of attire and none too clean of face. He stood with a finger pointing toward the club-house.

"Eh?" replied the detective. "One of what?"

"The athletic fellers."

"No. Why?"

"I wanted ter go in."

"Why don't you go?" asked the Detective of Destiny.

"'Cause I ain't a member, an' nobody kin git in that ain't, unless he has a feller ter go sponser fer him."

"I'm not a member."

"I could git in ef I wanted ter, fer I have a key. One of them chaps left it by accident when he bowled in our alley."

"When he did what?"

"Bowled in our alley. You see, I set up the pins on Mike Parson's bowling alleys."

"Oh! do you?"

"Yes; I'm Strike Maginnis. They call me 'Strike' because I kin bowl great, myself. The pins jest go down when this kid spins the ball! 'Spares' ain't in my line; I allays goes fer 'strikes,' an' I gets them, too. See?"

Nick answered absently, but Strike Maginnis, having sounded his own praises, came back to the present tense.

"Did ye see that gal go in?"

"Yes."

"She had a key, too. You see there is two doors, don't ye?"

"Yes."

"Wal, the big door is where they all go in when the place is open reg'lar, but the small one is a private entrance. Takes a key, you see. She had one, so in she went. Kinder perplexes me, too. Can't see why she didn't go the other way, ef she's one o' them. The way she went is a roundabout course ter git where she can see the stage. The private rooms, an' the dressin'-rooms, an' all that sort o' thing lays up-stairs by the way she has gone. I'll bet that it's pretty nigh deserted ter-night, fer all the members will be in the hall ter see Bowery Jake try ter stand up five rounds afore London Jimmy. Oh! cricky! but it will jest be a howlin' show!"

Strike Maginnis was full of enthusiasm, tempered with sorrow, because he could not see the sport, but he had given Nick an idea.

"Do you say you have a key?"

"Sure, Mike!"

"To the side-door?"

"Yes."

"Loan it to me."

"Not much!"

"Why not?"

"I'm kinder the protector o' this key till the owner shows up, ye see. Couldn't think o' givin' it over to you. But, see here, ef you'll let me go in, too, an' will stand as my guardeen, ef we git ketched, I'm yer huckleberry."

"Come with me."

The detective grasped Strike's arm and hurried him across the street. They reached the door and the boy applied the key.

Nick was fearful as to the results, but the key was no misfit. The door opened, and the way was clear!

Blackwood looked beyond them and saw a narrow, nearly dark stairway with a closed door at the top. What lay beyond that point he could not tell. He had some doubts as to the wisdom of the course they were taking, but hoped it would be for the best. If he encountered Irena inside it would be a bad break, but there must be something ventured or nothing would be won.

Had she come to meet somebody? That was his belief, for he could not believe one of her refinement would find any pleasure in such a low entertainment as boxing furnished.

"Heave ahead," requested Strike Maginnis, anxiously.

"Come!"

Nicholas ascended the stairs. The door was reached; he unclosed it. Beyond was a small room with several doors opening from it, but no one was to be seen. A burst of applause came from one side.

"Hi! do ye hear that?" cried Strike. "I'll bet Bowery Jake has give London Jimmy an awful smash!"

"Where do these doors lead to?"

"Them two there takes you into the place where the meetin'-rooms be, where they set an' smoke an' drink when no show is on. The other goes ter the dressin' rooms—not the one the stage fellers use, but where the athletes keep their things."

"We don't care for that. Let us look to the social quarters."

The detective carried out his idea. He found three small rooms, with tables and chairs, but they were untenanted.

"No gal here," remarked Strike.

"She must have gone to the hall, or somewhere near it."

"Mebbe, but we ain't looked in the dressin' rooms, yet."

"She cannot be there—still, we will look, for we want to make sure. Lead on."

Strike retreated to the hall and then opened the other door. He had not interest enough to be cautious, and it was considerable of a surprise when Nick seized and pulled him violently back.

"Eh? What—"

"Hush!"

The detective clapped his hand over the mouth of his companion, and the question was cut short. Nicholas had seen enough to realize the value of silence.

A narrow room with a multitude of small doors at the side and one large one at the end; a full light from gas; a woman in the room—alone! It was Irena Payne!

One of the little doors was open, and it was by this she stood. In her hand was a "blazer," and she was rummaging in its pockets. Nick was surprised and bewildered. What did it mean? What did she care about what was plainly the garment of one of the club members?

Evidently, it yielded nothing of interest, for she replaced it impatiently. Nick held his own door just far enough open so he could watch and remained passive. He could see that there was merely a locker in front of her, half-filled with clothing.

Suddenly there was a sound of voices beyond the room, and the spy knew somebody was approaching. Irena knew it, too. Her head was lifted, and an expression of startled surprise was seen on her face.

Abruptly she dodged into the locker and drew the door after her.

Then the large door at the end of the room opened and three men entered. Irena had barely escaped discovery, if that was what she sought to do. Strike Maginnis touched his companion's arm.

"Them fellers is Alexander Fox, Jack Lewton an' another chap," he informed, in a whisper.

"Be silent."

"I will, sure."

The three members of the club came in and threw themselves into chairs at one of the tables.

"Bowery Jack is making a game fight," remarked one of the party.

"Great!" declared a second.

"He is liable to do the Johnny Bull."

"Jack, I have no heart for such things," broke in Member No. Three.

"I know it, Aleck."

"Still," added Aleck, "I must say our man is doing great. Why, if he can uppercut the Englishman a few more times he will have him groggy. No doubt, too, he is watching to get in one on the jaw."

The Athlete Sport was waxing enthusiastic, himself, and it was plain that his grief was not of the deepest kind. Nicholas looked at the locker. Was it among such persons Irena found companionship?"

Several remarks were made in a way which would have done credit to a professional pugilist, and then Alexander Fox grew mournful again.

"Do you see Locker No. 15?" he asked.

"Yes."

"It was Danny's."

"Poor Danny!" sighed Jack Lewton and the third man, in concert.

"It never has been unfastened since his own hand turned the key to it before the hounds of law railroaded him to Sing Sing. According to our custom it remains sacred to him. In it are all his clothes and trinkets used as an athlete, and there they will stay."

"Poor Danny!"

"Say, Aleck, what is your dead private notion as to how he was killed?" asked Jack.

The athlete leaned forward and hissed:

"Murdered by the Paynes!"

"Why should they do it?"

"They had cause to be afraid of Danny."

"Why?"

"I wish I knew, but I do not. There was something in Danny's life which he never told to any one. It concerned him and Irena Payne."

"Possible?"

"Yes, and true. See here, boys. You, Tom, joined us only a year ago, and you, Jack, were busy with your hotel that summer, three years back, when Danny met the girl. The Paynes had located near our country quarters for their outing, and this threw them into our society. You know how it is with rich people. When they get to the country they will mix with those they would n't look at in New York."

"Wasn't Danny as good as they?" demanded Jack Lewton.

"He hadn't the social position, you see," explained Aleck. "Still, Danny was a brainy fellow, and good looking, and he was good enough for Irena Payne to have an affair with, by Jove!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MYSTERY OF THE CLUB-HOUSE.

NICHOLAS BLACKWOOD leaned eagerly forward. Aleck Fox was in a confidential mood, and it was plain he meant to tell something. How much? What was it?

The sport went on rapidly:

"What recommended us to the Payne party was the fact that we were athletes. In the city they would have scorned to think of that, but it was not so in the country. Ches Payne and his brother felt of my muscles with rapturous admiration, and watched me put the shot and throw the hammer. Danny was a fine oarsman, and that recommended him to Irena. He often rowed her on the lake."

"And they fell in love with each other?" questioned Jack Lewton.

"Mighty near it. They were somewhat hit, though both got over it. A mystery grew out of it, though; something happened which scared Irena off, and when the party came back to New York, there was nothing more for Danny. I know, though, that Irena was afraid he would tell something she didn't want told."

"Didn't he?"

"Not a word. I tried to pump Danny, but he kept his own counsel, and I was none the wiser. The fear of him has always been in Irena's mind, though, and I suspect it was the same with all the Paynes. When I say that you will see that when Danny was rash enough to seek shelter there, he was silenced."

"Would they go so far?"

"Possibly, not deliberately, but people often get cornered, you know. Perhaps it was done in passion, or partly by accident. A rash blow may have been it."

"They hated and feared Danny?"

"Yes."

"Isn't it possible he and Irena were married secretly, that summer?"

"No. Danny assured me that was not it, and I know he told the truth. Positively, it was not a marriage, secret or otherwise. Again, there was no food for scandal—Danny assured me of that, also. Yet, there was a crime done. Was it murder in which he and Irena shared? Or a robbery? Or some other violation of law? I know not, but I am going to learn, if possible."

"How?"

"I don't know; I have no clue."

"Poor Danny!"

"See the locker," directed Aleck. "Closed ever since he left us to go to Sing Sing, it has a melancholy significance now. Poor Danny!"

Alexander Fox rose. Athlete though he was, he had a soft step, and when he crossed the floor he made no sound. He reached the door of the locker and laid his hand on the handle. Nicholas Blackwood again became painfully interested. What would happen next?

People often do things for which there seems no real explanation. Fox supposed the door to be firmly locked, yet he pulled at the handle.

The result surprised him more than any one else.

The door responded to his strong touch; it opened.

Aleck recoiled. He saw the tenant of the locker.

Irena was discovered.

Silence, deep and impressive, fell upon the scene. Even the power of motion appeared to be lost by all there. Nick could see that Irena was dismayed by the discovery; her face was the image of mental distress. Plainly, the blow had fallen heavily.

Alexander Fox did not speak or move until the girl, seeing the folly of remaining where she was, came out of the locker. She confronted the athlete with a measure of firmness on the exterior, but it amounted to nothing; it was the pitiful defiance of one driven to bay.

The principal actors in the scene regarded each other until Aleck found his tongue.

"What in thunder does this mean?" he finally cried.

Irena was silent.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"Nothing," she faltered.

"Oh! nothing, eh?" he mocked. "Well, how came you here?"

She did not answer.

"How did you get into this building?—yes, and how did you get into this locker?"

Irena breathed heavily, and her head drooped.

"That locker has not been unfastened for a year, and only Danny had a key. You stole it from him when you killed him!"

"I did not."

"I say you did."

"Danny would not have the key when he had just come out of Sing Sing," reminded Jack Lewton.

The force of this argument convinced Aleck, but did not clear up the mystery. He could see that she had not broken the lock, and it was not plain how she had entered. All this, however, was so far subordinate to the main issues of the case that he dropped it.

"Well, what are you doing in this clubhouse?" he demanded. "You never came here before. Who admitted you now?"

"I have nothing to say," she replied.

"Oh! you haven't, eh? Well, I have. You claim to know nothing about how Danny died, yet here you are. Oh! no, you are not interested in Danny!"

His sarcasm was lost on Irena. She looked toward the door to the lower hall.

"I will go," she remarked, uneasily.

"Not until I understand this. Why are you here?"

He received no reply.

"I think we are in a way to solve Danny's death now. Come, woman, speak out. Confess, or you will not go from here."

Strike Maginnis again touched Nick Blackwood's arm.

"This won't do," he asserted. "Them measly rats ain't goin' ter set down on her while I am on deck. Say the word, an' wade in an' make 'em think a riot has broke loose!"

"Be calm!" requested Nick. "It will be time enough to act when we see her in danger. I don't want to reveal myself if I can avoid it."

"Hang it! I'd like to go in an' make a ten-strike!" muttered the boy, irritably.

"Would you dare keep me here?" Irena had asked.

"Yes," answered Aleck.

"I would call for help."

"Who would come but my own friends?"

"Would they band themselves against a woman?"

"I only know I have you here—yes, and your presence tells that you lied when you professed no interest in my brother. Know who killed Danny? Of course you do. Why else should you be here? Oh! the black past and the red present shows through all you do!"

The athlete had worked himself up to a pitch of fury, and the detective easily saw that his mood was dangerous. He did not know that Aleck ever had figured as a law-breaker, but he was now mad with rage over the death of Danny Fox.

"I know nothing about Danny's death," asserted Irena.

"I know better."

"It is true."

"Then why are you here?"

"I can make no explanation."

"Then you will stay here until you do!"

"I will go now, and if you seek to detain me, I will scream for help!" cried Irena.

"I will no longer submit to your ruffianly talk; I am going!"

She moved toward the door; Alexander blocked her way.

"You shall not go!"

He seized her violently by the arm.

"I am going to know the secret of Danny's death if I have to keep you here a year!" he cried.

The man called Tom moved quickly forward.

"See here, Aleck, none of this," he directed. "The Horatius Club is composed of gentlemen, and there must be nothing to mar its reputation. No violence here, old man; settle it elsewhere, if there is a bone to pick."

It was not the manly stand of one who defends a woman from a noble motive, but Tom was just as firm. He did not want the club ruined, so he interfered when he saw that Aleck had lost his head. Jack Lewton added his voice.

"That's best, Aleck," he asserted. "Don't bring your grudges into the club."

Nicholas Blackwood breathed freer. After all, it might not be necessary to reveal himself.

Aleck was not deaf to reason. Whatever elements he might have dormant in his nature, he had never been a law-breaker except in a small way. He had been desperately near it just then, but his companions had saved him.

He released his hold.

"I'll let her go if she will explain why she is here."

"She ought to do that. This club is private property, and she is not a member."

"I must know why you came, girl," persisted Aleck.

Irena cast a sidelong glance toward the door. Nick Blackwood saw and read it. He pulled unwilling Strike Maginnis away, and they had barely gained cover when there was a rustling of female garments in the hall and Irena flashed past, toward the outer door.

"Cricky! she's run away!" cried Strike.

"Escaped!"

The detective spoke the word with a sigh of relief. He felt sure she would be safe when she gained the street, and there was nothing to prevent her from gaining it. The clanging of the outer door quickly told of success.

"May I be garroted ef she ain't done 'em all up!" exclaimed Strike, jubilantly. "Say, boss, she's a thoroughbred."

The discomfited men appeared in the hall.

"I'll pursue her!" declared Aleck.

"What can you do? Would you attack her on the street?" asked Tom.

Fox came to a full stop.

"This is most infernal luck!" he cried.

"I was a fool to let her have the chance, and now she's gone. The jig is up. Well, life

is long, and I am not yet beaten; I will get into the game again right quick. She is knowing to the death of Danny, and I'm bound to solve the secret."

"Time enough for that," replied Jack Lewton, "and I will help you do it, too. I want a part in this work of avenging Danny. Just now, though, what we all need is a good drink, to settle our nerves."

"So we do," agreed Aleck. "It's my snout, and we won't go dry if we do have hard luck."

They retreated to the depths of the building, and Nick promptly took Strike Maginnis's arm and led him to the street.

"Say," muttered the boy, in wonder, "wot fer does all this mean, anyhow? I am clean rattled. Wot's the riddle?"

"This matter," answered the detective, "is one I don't understand, but it is one where you can earn good, hard cash by keeping dead quiet."

CHAPTER IX.

AN INTERESTING WITNESS.

STRIKE MAGINNIS looked doubtful, and then suddenly brightened up.

"I'll do it, on one condition."

"What is that?" asked Nicholas.

"That you will let me enter the game, an' let me help you."

"Help me? How do you know I want help?"

"You're a detective!"

"Oh! come, now, don't let your imagination run away with you. Why do you think that?"

"Ever sence I first see you, to-night, I have been trying ter remember where I've seen you before. I've got it, at last; you are Nick Blackwood, the detective that they call Napoleon Nick, the Detective of Destiny."

"Nonsense!"

"There ain't no nonsense about it. I ain't goin' it blind; I know all I claim. Come, boss, don't be afeerd o' me; I ain't no give-away. I kin be dead mum, an' I will. Yes, sirree, you kin depend on me. I like your style, an' I'll be as still as a dead cat in the gutter; you kin bet cash on that. Let me in, will ye?"

It was a sharp, earnest face that was upturned to the detective's, and the latter not only saw that it would be useless to deny his own identity, but that the boy had the look of one to be trusted.

He put out his hand to his companion.

"Are you sure you can keep still?"

"I be."

"Not a word to anybody?"

"Not one, boss."

"Then it's a bargain."

"Boss, you are a trump card, by cricky!" cried Strike, delighted, "an' you will find me right in line all the time."

The boy was excited and delighted, exultant. He might have felt less stirred up if he had known the promise had been made merely to keep him quiet, and that Nick had no thought that he would be called upon in the future. Not knowing this, he parted from the detective with feelings which made his step proud, and his head was carried well back.

Nicholas walked off in deep thought. Once his face grew sober, and he sighed and murmured:

"And I thought so well of her!"

It was his only sign of weakness, but he was disappointed in Irena Payne.

The detective went home and to bed. The next forenoon brought him little advance in his case. He was well advertised by the daily papers, and the opinion ventured that he would soon have the slayer of Danny Fox in the toils. In the mean while, according to their usual custom, these papers proceeded to settle the whole matter for him by studying all out—all except the name of the slayer. Their opinions differed, but none mentioned the Paynes as possible partners to the murder.

It was four o'clock of the afternoon when Nicholas, sitting in his private room, was informed that a lady wished to see him. He bade the servant admit her, and she was soon there.

He saw a trim, rather pretty young woman. Her attire was neat and pretentious—

a little too much so, perhaps—but she had all the appearance of one whose rank in life was not of the highest. Intelligent and respectable she looked, and her face was bright and saucy. To the detective she looked like a shop-girl.

"I am Nicholas Blackwood," he remarked.

"In what way can I serve you?"

"I've come to serve you!" was the quick reply.

"Better yet."

"My name is Dolly Brown."

"I think it is new to me."

"Well, I should hope so!" she cried.

"Why?"

"Girls that the detectives know are not well recommended."

Nick smiled, and then the girl's expression changed and she laughed aloud.

"Don't mind me," she added. "I didn't mean any harm; I only meant that if you knew me it might be in a professional way, and that I don't aspire to. You never arrested me."

"I can well believe it."

"I know a man you did arrest, and he got a year. He always says you're the sharpest detective in New York, and that nobody but you could have caught him."

"I am complimented."

"More than I am; but, of course, my associates are not all of that kind. Jail-birds and I don't take to each other. But here I am rattling on without a thought of business. I've come to see you about the murder of Danny Fox."

"Did you know him too?"

"Good gracious! I hope not. But, you see, I was in the house that night."

"I do not remember you as one of the household."

"I ain't one of them. I'm a dressmaker, and that is what took me there."

"I see. Dressmaker to Miss Payne?"

"No, you don't see, for I'm not anything of the sort. I'm not expert enough to do her work. I'm dressmaker to Mary Moss, the girl who discovered Danny Fox dead."

"I had not heard of you."

"I left the house early that morning, and before the murder was discovered. I ain't seen any of them since, but I've read the papers."

Miss Brown suddenly leaned forward and added:

"It strikes me that some of the folks in that house must be mighty heavy sleepers, or else they forget easy."

"Why?"

"Because all wasn't silent as the tomb there that night. I heard sounds, and I saw a man taken away in a carriage."

"At what hour?"

"One o'clock."

"Do you know this man?"

"No. I saw him carried out, but who he was, or who carried him, I don't know."

"Begin at the beginning, and tell me all about this story."

"I will. You see, I have done dressmaking for Mary Moss for two years. I have been making a dress for her lately, and it was done at Mr. Payne's, with Miss Payne's leave. I finished it up the evening before Danny Fox was found dead. Usually, I went home at once, but not this time. I had a severe tooth-ache, and Mary made me stay there, so as not to go out in the cold air."

"I went to bed, all alone in the front room on the top floor, but precious little I slept, the tooth was so friendly with my nerves; it just kept me on the jump."

"Well, others may have slept sound that night, but I heard sounds about the house until one o'clock. The sounds made me cross, and I remember wondering if they were moving out."

"Finally, I heard a team drive up to the front of the house. I was not able to sleep, so I got up to look out. Then it was that I saw two men come out of the house, carrying a third man. They just put him in the carriage, and then off drove the team."

"What became of the men?" asked Nicholas.

"The ones who had brought him out come back into the house, and the one who had come in the carriage drove it away."

"What more did you see?"

"Nothing."

"But you must have some idea of who the men were who brought the third man out."

"Not an idea. It was a dark night and I could not make out anything."

"How many of the men who belong in this house do you know?"

"All of them, by sight, including the two Payne brothers."

"Was either of the Paynes there?"

"I tell you the truth when I say that I don't know. Both are familiar to me by sight, but I did not see the men close enough to know them then; I can't for my life tell who they were."

"That is all you know?"

"Yes."

"Did you see or hear anything about the house, that evening, which was out of the ordinary course?"

"No."

"Whereabouts in the house were you during the evening?"

"I had dinner in the dining-room with Mary Moss, after the family had eaten. Then I went up-stairs to do an errand for her, an hour later. As I came back, on my way to the lower floor again, Miss Payne had just entered the back parlor and lighted the gas—"

"When was this?"

"An hour after I had dinner."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure!" Dolly replied, with emphasis.

Nicholas was silent. Irena had positively declared that she had not entered either the parlor or back parlor after dinner. Here was a discrepancy.

"After that," proceeded Dolly, "I stayed down-stairs until it was bed-time. Then I went up to my room—"

"What time was this?"

"Half-past ten."

"How do you know so accurately?"

"Because, just as I reached the top of the stairs, Mr. Chesterham Payne came in from the stoop. In the lower hall he took out his watch and looked at the time, and I overheard him say: 'Half-past ten!' He then went into the parlor—"

"Went where?"

"Into the parlor."

"At half past ten?"

"Yes."

Nicholas was more surprised than ever. Commissioner Payne stated positively that he had not been in either front or back parlors the night of the murder!

The detective proceeded to question Dolly more closely than ever, but she adhered to her statement in all particulars. She did it, too, with an air of such candor and simplicity that the listener could not doubt her good faith. As to her real accuracy she was emphatic, but Nicholas had to disbelieve either her or Chesterham Payne.

One was mistaken, or had willfully lied. Which was it?

The detective had acquired a skill at cross-questioning which was equal to that of a lawyer, and he used it on Dolly. The possibility that she might be actuated by malice led him to seek craftily for a possible grudge against the Paynes, but she stood the test well.

He could find no motive for her flat contradiction of the Paynes.

They were still talking when there was a rap at the door. Not caring to be interrupted, the detective went quickly to answer and, if possible, ward off the applicant.

What he saw when he unclosed the door surprised him. First, he beheld a fellow detective who was well known to him; next, he saw Mr. Robertson Payne.

These men entered the room without the formality of asking leave, and Nicholas was angered into sharply demanding:

"Well, what do you want here?"

Robertson Payne quickly pointed to Dolly Brown.

"We want that young woman!"

"Why, sir?"

"She is a thief; she has stolen from my house, and this officer has a warrant for her arrest!"

Nicholas flushed with mingled emotions. Was his witness to be thus spirited away?

The second detective put in a word mildly:

"I hope we don't interfere with your own business, Blackwood, but this is quite right. The woman is a thief, and—"

Thus far Dolly Brown had listened like

one turned to stone. Now, hot anger blazed out in her face, and she turned angrily upon the speaker.

"You tell a lie!" she cried. "It is infamously false; it is all a vile plot. I, a thief? Who dares say so? Who is my accuser?"

"I refer you to this gentleman," and the second detective pointed to Mr. Payne.

"Yes," added that man, "I am the accuser; and, what is more, we propose to land you in prison without delay!"

"I see it all!" cried Dolly, her eyes flashing. "Nobody thinks me a thief, but this is all a scheme to hide the perfidy of others. I am accused so I cannot be a witness against the Payne family!"

CHAPTER X.

A PERPLEXED MAN.

A CERTAIN person woke from slumber of a certain sort. He did not wake in the best of temper, or with the best of physical feeling. He rolled his head and growled before he opened his eyes, for his head had a dull ache and there were divers other pains through his being.

Finally his eyes opened. He looked around, taking in the details of the room he was in.

"Hallo!" he said, aloud, "where am I?"

Nobody volunteered an answer, and he was not able to answer, himself.

"I've been in a good many places," he added, "and had all sorts of luck, but after having bed on couch and earth pretty much all over the world, I don't recognize this place. At last accounts I was in New York, and as I have no wings, I must be there now."

He noted the room further.

"Bed white as snow; bedstead of brass. Sparsely furnished room, all neat as wax. I suppose this is a hotel, but I don't remember putting up here. And I don't remember having money enough to pay the bill if I had put up. Here I am, however—where?"

Being alone, he sought to get some light by rising and looking out. Quickly he fell back, however.

"One thing natural anyhow," he cheerfully continued. "I remember now that I fell sick in the streets, and, being totally without money or friends, I was in a bad fix. I must have braced up, or I could not have come to this hotel. I wonder—"

He paused and pressed his hand to his head.

"Confound it!" he muttered, after a pause, "I don't understand it at all. I recollect, now, that I entered a rear yard, and from there boldly intruded to the parlor of what I thought was a private house, and took position on a lounge. Surely, this is not a private house!"

He wanted to believe it was; wanted to believe the people of the house had put him to bed in a spirit of kindness, but the furniture of his room, with the wardrobe, prim table, brass bedstead and barren walls was not the condition of affairs to be looked for in a private house.

"What came next?" he pursued, still speaking aloud. "There was something exciting. Ah! I remember now—a young lady entered the room, and then—Whew!"

He broke off suddenly and whistled softly.

"Then came a man in a suit like a convict. He came from the yard, as I had done; he accosted the lady; he implored her to save him, saying he had escaped from Sing Sing, and was pursued by officers. Yes, yes; I recollect that. What next?"

He buffeted his wits for an answer, but advanced little toward the explanation of the riddle.

"Nothing!" was his verdict. "The last I remember I lay on the lounge, watching the others. That was all, except that I was desperately sick. I must have relapsed into a sort of coma. It is day now, and I have lost several hours out of my book of life."

This fact did not seem to worry the man much. He was in a clean, comfortable bed, and was disposed to be satisfied.

"Queer! I was dead broke; I had not a cent to my name and no friend in all New York, yet here I am in bed, cozy and hap-

py. Cassius Rand, old boy, you are playing in luck!"

He was a cheerful person, it seemed, and a placid smile crossed his face. Totally ignorant of his surroundings, he was content as long as he had a comfortable place to rest his head. He forgot his bliss as the door opened and a young woman entered the room.

He stared at her in some surprise. She wore a spotless suit in which white predominated, there being a bewitching little cap of that color, a white apron and a dress of mild blue.

"The chambermaid," thought Cassius Rand. "Well, she is a wholesome specimen, but her entrance is a trifle irregular."

The young woman advanced with a cheerful smile.

"Are you better, sir?" she asked.

"Yes, I am," replied Cassius. "I had a headache, last night."

"You will soon be all right."

"I think so."

"You must take life easy, though."

"Oh! I will; I know how to do that."

"That is lucky."

"Where is the proprietor?"

"Of what?"

"This hotel."

The young woman hesitated.

"I think he will be around soon, Mr. Jones."

"Mister—a—Mister what?"

"Mister Jones, I said."

"So I thought. Who is Jones? The name is unique, though I think I have heard it before. Who is Jones? Oh! he must be the proprietor."

"Isn't your name Jones?" she asked, with an air of one humoring a child.

"Well, if it is, I don't know my ancestry, miss. Jones? Why, my own mother would not know me under such a handle. Jones? Did I register as a plebeian Jones?"

"That is the name on the book."

"Well, I must have been out of my head. But say, how did I put up money enough to get quarters in this hotel? My clothes never did it for me, for they were a mass of rags."

"Oh! no, sir, they were very good clothes."

"The dickens they were! I had good clothes—miss, you joke with me. I, Cassius Rand, have good clothes? Why, if we had them here we should see a parcel of rags."

"Let me convince you."

The young woman remained as pleasant as ever, and she went with light steps to the wardrobe and brought out a suit of garments which she laid before Cassius Rand.

"Look for yourself," she directed.

He did look, and he saw a suit of neat, almost new and very expensive diagonal. That they had been worn was certain, but it was a suit that never cost less than fifty dollars, and was as good as new. Beside them she had placed the underwear—a shirt and drawers of finest wool.

Cassius gazed almost stupefied.

"Do you mean to say these are mine?" he demanded.

"Certainly, sir."

"Then I must have been transformed into a millionaire. If my pennies were all dollars, I could not have bought such an outfit as this. Miss, you will oblige me by calling the clerk. This sort of thing is bliss, but I can't afford to swindle this hotel, and pay my keep I cannot. Let me tell the people of the hotel this, and not sail under false pretenses."

"Mr. Jones, this is not a hotel."

"What in the dickens is it, then?"

"A hospital!"

"What?"

"A hospital."

Cassius Rand was amazed, but as his gaze wandered over the dress of his companion, he lost little time in disbelief. Her dress and her unceremonious entrance were explained; they were like hospital ways. He believed, but he was again puzzled.

"How the dickens did I get here?"

"I don't know, sir; you came at night, when the other nurse was on duty."

"How many hours have I slept?"

"You have been here four days, sir."

"What?" cried Cassius.

"You have been here four days."

"Well, I'll be shot for a Malay pirate! Four days—How did I get here?"

"Your friends brought you."

"My friends?"

"Yes."

Cassius was silent for a moment, and then he broke into a hearty laugh. Something in the remark amused him greatly.

"Officers of a charity organization, I suppose?"

"Do you think the ward of a charity organization would have a private room at thirty dollars a week?" she replied.

"At—thirty dollars—Do you mean to say I am rolling up such a bill here?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then the hospital is just so much out. I can't pay it, for I have nothing to pay with."

"Our terms are always cash in advance, so you can rest easy; your expenses are paid."

Cassius Rand gazed at his companion in open-eyed wonder for some time, and then shook his head.

"You or I are crazy, young woman. You should see a doctor."

"If you want to know more I will call the night nurse. She has just finished her sleep and is outside. I will call her in, if you wish, sir."

"I do; call her by all means."

The young woman went out.

"This beats the record," quoth Cassius Rand. "I have been all over the world and had all sorts of experiences, but this is the strangest. Possibly I am in a mad-house—I will see the other woman and decide—here she comes."

The first young woman returned, and with her was a second one who was dressed exactly like her. The second one, however, had more of a business air, and she spoke to the point, though very pleasantly.

"I am told that you want to know all about your arrival here, Mr. Jones. I will tell you, but let me do the talking; you must not excite yourself, and too much talking will bring on a fever."

"Proceed!" directed Cassius, impatiently. "You were the one who was here when I came, last night, I suppose?"

"I was the one, but you came here three nights ago, Mr. Jones."

"I forgot that I had lost my calendar. Proceed!"

"You came here as described. Your friend had charge of you and was very solicitous as to your welfare. He picked out the best room he could find, and paid for four weeks then, the sum being one hundred and twenty dollars. He said that if that did not prove to be enough we should have more, and that you were to be taken care of as long as you were ill, and he would meet all expenses."

"Noble man! Loyal friend!" quoth Cassius Rand, grimly.

"Then he went away in the carriage—"

"What carriage?"

"He brought you in a carriage."

"Oh! did he? Of course, of course! And these garments of fine wool and elaborate pattern—how came they here?"

"You had them on when you came."

"But I had no crown, or robes of royalty?" asked the patient.

"Oh! no, Mr. Jones."

"I can well believe it; Mr. Jones is not built that way," grimly commented Cassius. "What did this friend of Mr. Jones's look like?"

"I can only remember that he was a large man, handsomely dressed, and that he had a big beard."

"He was anxious about Jones's welfare, was he?"

"Yes, sir."

"Jones came in a carriage, wore fine clothes, and had a friend who voluntarily paid for four weeks board at this hospital. Lucky Jones! You have cheaper rooms, haven't you?"

"This is one of our most expensive. We have some which are five dollars a week less, and then there are the wards, where patients do not have to pay at all."

"But Jones's friend wanted the best, did he?"

"Yes, sir; but you must not talk any more now. Go to sleep, sir, and you can speak further when you wake."

"Capital idea. Good-day! Call again!" Cassius turned his head away, and the nurses went out with soft steps.

"He is not yet right, mentally," remarked one.

It was a natural speech, yet it was incorrect. Cassius Rand had his mental faculties fully.

"Extraordinary event in my life!" he muttered. "A beggar on horseback, but Jones is luckier than Rand, and Jones is content. This puzzles me. It is positively not a case of mistaken identity, for the man with money had full possession of me, and need not be deceived. What does it mean? I went to lie down in somebody's parlor and saw a charming girl and a convict. Now, what happened after? Yes, and who brought me here? More, why was I brought here?"

CHAPTER XI.

A POSSIBLE CLUE

DOLLY BROWN was a young woman of strong will and courage, and, when she felt herself aggrieved, she did not hesitate to make the fact known. The charge made against her by Robertson Payne was too much for her patience, and she flashed the counter-charge at him as before described, her manner quite as forcible as her words.

Mr. Payne recoiled from her as if frightened.

"It's all a plot to hush up the mystery at the Payne house by getting me out of the way!" she repeated, vehemently. "You know I am no thief, and you are guilty of new infamy when you say it."

The second detective interrupted reprovingly:

"Come, come, young woman, this ebullition will only do you harm."

"What do you expect?" cried Dolly. "Do you want me to stand here and see my honesty sworn away by a lie?"

"If you are innocent—"

"You know I am!"

"I do not know it, but if you are, you are perfectly safe. The law never injures the innocent."

"Gammon! The law was made all right, but the prosecuting attorney, nowadays, puts his whole soul into getting a conviction, whether the accused is innocent or not."

"No abuse, girl!" sternly added the officer.

Napoleon Nick interrupted calmly, but decisively:

"The young lady has a right to free her mind if she is wrongfully accused, and I will stand as her friend while she does it. Still, I see no reason why there should be a quarrel here. I know Mr. Payne well enough to be sure that if he is not right in making his charge, he is laboring under a sincere mistake. The honor of Mr. Payne cannot be doubted. On the other hand, I am equally sure Miss Brown is innocent. Now, let us all reason together and see if this cannot be explained satisfactorily."

This temperate address was like balm to the various disturbed spirits, and Robertson Payne was quick to grow milder of manner.

"Heaven forbid that I should do any one injustice," he replied. "I certainly would not do harm to a woman. I only ask, Mr. Blackwood, that you hear the story and judge for yourself."

"Let me hear it."

"Briefly, we have missed jewels from our house—a necklace of diamonds, three rings of the same sort, and considerable minor matter. Somebody stole them, and the clue to the perpetrator was given to us by Mary Moss, a servant in our employ."

"What did she know about it?" flashed Dolly.

"She said you went into the room where the jewels were kept—"

"She sent me there on an errand, then. I do not know where they were kept, but I went only just where she told me to go. She did send me on two or three errands to certain rooms, and I went as directed."

"But you saw no jewels?" inquired Nicholas.

"Not one; I did not look."

"What other evidence is there, Mr. Payne?" asked the detective.

"Well, Mary Moss said it must be this girl."

"How did she know?"

"She knew this girl had been in the rooms."

"What else?"

"Nothing."

"Do you call this evidence?"

"It is not positive proof, but it is enough to warrant a search," responded Mr. Payne, firmly. "I don't want to do injustice, but I am persuaded that this girl is the thief, and I intend to carry this matter on until I have settled it."

"You have a warrant for her arrest, have you?"

"Yes."

"Whoever made it out must have been asleep when he did it. There is absolutely no evidence against her, sir."

"Her room should be searched," suggested the second detective.

"Search all you please!" cried Dolly.

"What do you say to this, Mr. Payne?" asked Nick.

"I, too, think it should be done."

"Suppose you do not find anything?"

Mr. Payne hesitated.

"Mary Moss's manner showed that she considered this girl guilty," he persisted.

"How did Mary act?"

"She was confused."

"Might not that have indicated guilt on her part, rather than on that of this young lady?"

"Mary has been with us for ten years, ever since she was a mere child. She enjoys our full confidence in all ways."

"Miss Brown is worthy of the same confidence until she is confronted with more evidence than is now mentioned against her. No magistrate would hold her on such flimsy evidence, Mr. Payne. I speak in the interest of all when I say that she is not blackened by anything you have told. Now, she has agreed to let you search her room. If she remains of that opinion, I will go along as her friend, and if the search reveals nothing—what then, Mr. Payne? Will you withdraw your charge?"

Nicholas asked the question with considerable interest. He did not forget Dolly's impulsive assertion that this was all a plot against her, to get her out of the way so she could not talk about the crime at Payne's, and he wondered how Robertson would receive the suggestion.

The latter was slow with his reply, and when it came he spoke with evident reluctance.

"You know more of law than I do, Mr. Blackwood, and you may be right. I agree to your plan."

"Better give up even the search," suggested the second detective, irritably.

"Why?"

"The girl is willing the search should be made. If she is guilty she has got the stuff out of the way."

Dolly wheeled upon the speaker.

"Now you see here!" she cried; "if there is any more cheap talk against me somebody will get a chance to prove what they assert. You just make a note of that!"

Dolly was belligerent, but Nicholas continued the general peacemaker. He soothed everybody, and finally got the party under way to the dressmaker's room.

They arrived there, they searched; they found no jewels.

"Well, are you satisfied?" demanded Dolly, sharply.

"I admit that I may have been mistaken," returned Mr. Payne. "In the absence of anything more definite I am constrained to believe that the young lady is innocent. If I have made a mistake I most sincerely beg her pardon."

He bent his gray head as he spoke, and Nicholas Blackwood could not avoid believing at that moment that the old gentleman was all that an honorable man should be. He had the air which comes only through good breeding, and looked as if he deserved his spotless reputation.

Yet, the Payne mystery remained!

"I ain't the one to harbor a grudge," answered Dolly, "but I hope the next man that misses something will not fly at me as if I was a jail bird—I do so!"

Some friction remained, and the detective had more to do to soothe all parties, but he got rid of Mr. Payne and the second officer without any more trouble. He remained

with Dolly, himself, and, when they were alone, she abruptly turned upon him with the exclamation:

"If you want to find that Danny Fox's murderer you know where to look, now!"

"Where?"

"To Rob Payne."

"Prove it!"

"I will."

"Proceed!"

"Oh! I can't do it now, but I'm going to look into the case and do some detective work, myself. When people tread on me they make a mistake. Don't think I am a crank, or that I am too vindictive, but Robertson Payne has not spared my feelings, and I won't spare his."

"What do you expect to learn?"

"Who killed Danny Fox."

"Have you a suspicion?"

"I have come to the conclusion that it never was done in that house without somebody on the lower floors knowing all about it. Again, what about the man I saw carried out to the carriage?"

"You don't know that either of the Paynes had share in that, do you?"

"No, I don't; but now they have shown their hand I am duly wide awake."

"Shown their hand?"

"I accused Mr. Payne of trying to get me sent up as a thief so I could not tell what I knew about the Fox murder. I grasped the truth at once; I can see it now. That was just it, and it would have worked had not your bold stand for me shown Payne that he could not run over me as he liked."

"Incredible!"

"Well, it's true, just the same, and you will find it out so. If the Paynes are all right, why don't they come forward and tell about the man whom they carried out to the carriage, that night? Oh! I tell you there were great goings-on there, then, but I can't just explain the meaning of it all. I wish I could. Well, I'll find out!"

Nicholas opposed Dolly no further. He saw she was as fixed in her views as the rocks of Harlem, and—he was not sure but she was right. His faith in the Paynes was not above the fever point on the scale.

Regarding Dolly as a useful person to know, the detective talked with her in such a way that he strengthened the hold he had gained by acting as her champion, and, when he left, he had her promise to be cautious, silent and cunning.

It was dark when Nick reached his own home. He found a caller waiting for him—a man in irreproachable dress, and with a huge mustache which was waxed and drawn out until the ends looked like horns on a Texas steer.

This man bowed most profoundly, and began his explanation of the call without delay.

"Pardon, sir," he said, "but can you advise a gentleman of good education and eminent family?"

"Is it yourself?"

"It is, sir; it is I."

"As far as possible, I will advise you."

"Thanks, sir; thanks. You are qualified to do so, for you are of illustrious position, while I am only a barber—but, sir, I am allied by blood to the noblest of French families; I am, indeed."

His bows seemed to grow deeper, until there was danger that he would break his neck, and Nick tried to prevent such a catastrophe by inquiring:

"On what subject do you wish advice?"

"Sir," replied the barber, "it is concerning the Fox murder!"

CHAPTER XII.

A LIFE AT STAKE.

NAPOLEON NICK at once became interested.

"What do you know about the Fox murder?" he inquired.

"Possibly, nothing; possibly, something," answered the barber.

"Explain," directed the detective.

"Sir, you know my calling; you know that it is my fortune while times are hard to get my living by wielding the razor on the faces of men who are in some cases by far my social inferiors. I have some good

customers, and I value them. Their good will is my livelihood; therefore to lose them would be serious. I have battled with my conscience; with my sense of duty; with my love of gold, good food and the finer pleasures of life. Should I tell all, or should I not?"

"Duty should be your sole guide."

"Do you think so, monsieur?"

"Decidedly, yes."

"Then I will speak. On the night when this odious Danny Fox was killed I chanced to be passing the Payne house at a late hour; I think at about one o'clock. I noticed a light in the parlor; I saw figures moving about within, as their shadows were thrown on the window-shades. Also, a carriage stood by the curbstone, outside the house."

"Proceed!"

"It had been my good luck to be tonsorial artist for the Payne brothers, and I knew them well. I thought to myself, 'They are going out of town. I will see them go, and, all unseen, wish them a silent God-speed!'"

"Well?"

"I stepped into a doorway on the opposite side of the street, and from there I watched. Soon the door opened and three men came out. Two walked, bearing in their arms a third who was either dead or unconscious; he moved not, no more than the house, itself."

"Yes?"

"He was put in the carriage by the two, and the carriage was then driven off by a man who had been with it. The two then re-entered the house, monsieur; the door was closed, and the drama was over."

"Did you recognize any of these men?"

"I did."

"Who were they?"

"The two who brought the third man out were the Payne brothers, Chesterham and Robertson."

"Are you sure of what you say?"

"I am."

"Who was the man they brought out?"

"I do not know."

"Did you see how he looked?"

"I did not; I have not the least idea how he did look. He may have been old or young, black or white; I know not; I saw him not."

"What do you make out of this?"

"Nothing, monsieur. I know not whether it has bearing on the case at all, but in such an emergency I thought all things might count, so I have come with my story. It may not be of use; it may be very commonplace. I do not tell it because I suspect anything, but because the case is in your hands, and I thought you ought to know of it."

"You have done well, and proved that you are a good citizen. I thank you for telling me this. As you seem to think, so do I think it can have no bearing on the case, but it attests your honor, sir, as a citizen," remarked Nick, with more diplomacy than sincerity.

"Noble sir, I thank you for those words!" cried the barber, reaching out and seizing Nick's hand.

The detective had not failed to size up his caller, and he tickled his fancy somewhat further while he remained, and, after questioning him skillfully, bowed the man out as politely as if he were himself a son of France.

Left alone, the man-hunter meditated.

"Dolly did not dream what she told me. There was a man carried out. Who was it? Why was he carried? Where was he taken? Why was he taken?"

Nicholas was puzzled. As far as he knew there was nobody missing from the Payne house, but somebody had been taken away the night of the murder, and nothing had even been said to him. He would have been very unsuspecting if he had not suspected that the unknown man had some part in the mystery of the night.

"I can't get the clue," finally exclaimed the detective. "I don't know when I have been so puzzled. What is the meaning of all this? Who was that man? Are the Paynes shielding somebody else, instead of themselves being guilty?"

Long he dwelt on the mystery, but nothing came of it. He found no clue on which he could base a definite opinion of the mystery, and, while he reflected, it all be-

came dim as drowsiness stole on him. He was lying down, and the ease of the situation was too persistent a wooer for anything else to hold command of his faculties, just then.

He slept.

The window was open, and the breeze sifted in with many a waver of the lace curtains which hung over them. Outside, the rumble of a few belated carts and almost as few cabs came audibly, but Nicholas heard them not. If he had been awake he would have heard no more. A peaceful, a comparatively silent scene; a scene of solitude.

But wait! Solitude may not reign there so completely. There was a faint, scraping sound, as if something was moving on the low roof of the annex to the house, just outside Nicholas's window. Was it some roving animal of the night?

The curtains stirred afresh and moved apart enough to make a slight opening between the two halves. In the aperture a human face was for a moment revealed—or part of one. A human face, yet partially concealed by a mask which hid it to a degree. Eyes, bright and eager, gleaming from behind the mask.

More, the eyes were hungry—for what?

The unknown saw the sleeping detective. Then he moved anew. He parted the curtains more decisively, and one brawny leg was thrown over the window sill.

The other leg followed; the body followed the legs. Slowly and with the greatest care the man entered the room. Over the sill he glided like a shadow, silent, solitary, secretive, suspicious.

Nicholas slept. Better for him if he had wakened then.

The intruder stood erect. Then his hand disappeared for a moment in his pocket. It reappeared—a knife was in his grasp. Holding that he stood with his eyes fixed on the detective. Ominous advent; more ominous portent of the future.

He began to move across the floor. With the same care and silence before noted he advanced toward Nicholas Blackwood, the knife firmly grasped and his eyes glittering more keenly than ever.

The detective stirred in his sleep; he moved uneasily; he muttered like one who has dreams of unpleasant nature.

The masked man dropped to the floor.

Crouching there he was less liable to be seen, if the sleeper opened his eyes. The intruder was cautious, and evidently thought he had time enough for his work.

"Who killed Danny Fox?" muttered Nicholas, irritably.

"Ah!"

A breath, a mere aspiration, escaped the prowler's lips.

"The mystery must be solved!" continued Nicholas.

"Ah-h-h!"

"I will learn all."

"Police devil! you shall learn nothing!" hissed the intruder.

He had lost his cunning in the presence of some more overpowering emotion. Forgetting the policy of caution, he had sent out the last words with such vehemence that they could not well fail to arouse the sleeper. He bounded to his feet; he leaped toward the detective; he raised the knife for a blow.

The knife fell!

Nicholas Blackwood had been schooled in a career of time and rough experience, and that made him quick to act when necessity occurred. The necessity was there then, if it ever was, and he was not slow to act. He writhed to one side with remarkable promptness, and just in time. The knife, driven with all the power of a strong arm, buried itself in the upholstery of the lounge, but it touched not his flesh.

He threw up his hands to grapple with his assailant, but this he did not succeed in doing at once.

The impetus of the assassin was such that he went forward headlong and fell on the detective.

Both went to the floor.

Nick did not lose his presence of mind. He knew he had to deal with one who sought to kill him, and he governed himself accordingly. As soon as possible he got his hands into play, and the first thing he did was to try and seize hold of the assassin's wrist.

Providence guided the effort; he caught hold as he intended, and then it was man to man.

Frantically the unknown tried to wrest his arm away, but he did not succeed. All that was left for him was to fight it out, and this he proceeded to do. Grappling with the detective he began the fight with the fierceness of one who seeks to take a human life, spurred on by fiendish passions.

Not a word did either speak. Silently they began and continued the contest, and like panthers they rolled over the floor.

CHAPTER XIII.

TRACES OF THE NIGHT.

On the afternoon preceding the events last narrated Commissioner Payne was seated alone in his private room at the family home. He had been reading a newspaper, but its columns seemed to lack attraction, for the sheet had fallen to the floor and he was wholly wrapped up in thought. He finally rose with an impatient movement.

"Something must be done to head off the bloodhound," he muttered. "Ruin will follow unless he is deprived of his fangs. Something must be done. What?"

Back and forth he went across the room until a knock sounded at the door. He bade the applicant enter; the door opened; he saw one of the family servants whose name was Peter Hooper.

"Beg pardon, sir," spoke this man, "but can I see you?"

"Yes," replied the commissioner. "What is it?"

Peter closed the door, and lowered his voice as he replied:

"I have something to show you, sir, which came to me in an odd way. Before I show them I will tell you how they were found."

"Be brief."

"I will, sir. I went up to the attic, just awhile ago, to try and find things which were put away there last fall, but were now wanted. While rummaging there I came upon a suit of clothes—a suit of clothes in the garret, sir."

"What of it?"

"Against orders, sir: against orders. It is orders from Mr. Robertson Payne that no old clothes shall be thus put away to foster disease, as he expresses it. 'Sell or give away what can't be worn by us,' has always been his orders, sir."

"Proceed."

"When I saw those clothes I knew at the start that it was very irregular. I knew it more than ever when I had looked closely to the clothes. Mr. Payne, they were so ragged and poor and mean that you would not have tolerated anybody inside your doors that would wear such things."

Thus far the commissioner had been apathetic. Now he seemed to grow interested.

"Ah!" he murmured, con-committantly.

"I did not recognize the clothes, and well I might not. They seemed to be of foreign make; anyhow, they were not of fashion ever worn in New York by rich or poor. I was mystified—but you have asked me to be brief, sir. In the pocket of the coat I found these, sir."

Peter produced a handful of papers of various kinds and held them out to the commissioner, who took them quickly.

"Have you read them?" he inquired.

"A few of them, but most of them I can't read. There are a good many newspaper clippings, and of these almost all are in some heathenish language which I can't make out."

"You can leave them with me. What have you done with the old garments?"

"I left them there, sir."

"Quite right, Peter. Have you mentioned this to any one?"

"No, sir."

"Then avoid mention of it wholly. If anybody has put old clothes in the attic against my brother's orders, it is for him to deal with the subject. He would be very angry if you or I interfered. He will want to proceed his own way—you and I will keep silent, so he will not be angry with us."

"Yes, sir. I will not say a word to anybody."

"You can go, Peter."

"Yes, sir; thank you."

The servant went out. Mr. Payne stood looking after him thoughtfully.

"I did not know—"

He ceased to speak, turned, went to the table and sat down with the documents in his hand.

Of the number one was large, long and nearly new, if its color was a reliable indication. He opened it. He saw a paper which was nearly all of printed matter, though somewhat of writing. Nearly everything therein was in the Spanish language. Mr. Payne was not a Spanish scholar, but he could read enough to make out this document.

"A commission in the Brazilian army as captain," he commented, "and to one Cassius Rand. An English-sounding name, and doubtless made to an Englishman or an American. Of recent date, too."

Putting the paper down, he pursued his investigation. The next thing was a newspaper clipping. It stated that a certain vessel had been wrecked off the coast of South America, and that the passengers and crew had been attacked by pirates, and owed their salvation to the cunning and valor of Cassius Rand. What Mr. Rand had done was described at full length.

Next came a clipping from a Cape Town paper which described an elephant hunt in the wilds wherein Cassius Rand had won glory by remarkable shooting and courage. Pinned to it was an account of a fight between white men and Bushmen, and here, too, Cassius Rand figured to advantage.

Other things of like nature followed.

Cassius Rand appeared as a temporary chief of cannibals among whom he was shipwrecked, and whose good-will he somehow obtained and held until he escaped, at the same time saving the crew of a shipwrecked vessel; he was seen in another clipping as a miner in Australia who had been robbed of considerable money by Bushrangers; he was seen as the friend of Siberian refugees; he appeared as the rescuer of a party of tourists from Italian banditti.

Somehow, all this fascinated Chesterham Payne, and he read eagerly until he was brought to a stop by the clippings in English having been all read through. What he might have learned from the articles in the foreign tongues, and in what other roles Cassius Rand appeared, he could not tell.

He finally leaned back in his chair.

"So this was the man!" he murmured.

For a long while he thought and sat motionless. What was in his mind he did not indicate, but he finally aroused, gathered up the papers and tied them neatly.

"They shall not be lost," he soliloquized.

"The man seems to have been a prince of adventurers, and to value his unique collection. But what of Robertson? Rash, rash!"

With this he went in person to the attic, found the clothes to which the servant had referred, and restored the papers to the pocket. This done he went below, being just in time to meet his brother as he came in. Robertson Payne looked worried, and he asked the commissioner to enter the parlor with him.

"Have you been to Police Headquarters, to-day?" Robertson inquired.

"Yes."

"Is there any news—of the Danny Fox affair?"

"I did not hear of any."

"Is Blackwood making any advance?"

"I do not know."

"Why don't you take this matter out of his hands, and manage it yourself?"

"The superintendent had given him directions before I saw him, and I thought it best to let matters take their course."

"Blackwood is too headstrong."

"Possibly you are right."

"A detective should be quiet, deep and—and considerate. Now," pursued Robertson Payne, looking at the floor, "this Blackwood is a friend of ours, but he is reckless. He is not the man to manage the case with due skill and—and thoughtfulness. He may unintentionally bring scandal on us—not that we deserve it; but he might."

"I have been thinking of that," confessed the commissioner.

"He should be silenced."

"I do not clearly see how it can be done. Brother. Blackwood is an old, experienced

detective, and to take such a man off from the case would be an erratic step."

"Why can't the fellow fall sick?"

"I fear he will not be so obliging."

"Anyhow, he must not continue in his tumultuous way on this case. Fox was slain in our house. We have had too much publicity already. Are we to let Blackwood make more for us?"

"What can we do?"

"Get him out of the way!" replied Robertson Payne, with emphasis.

"How?"

"A way can be found; he must be silenced. If not, his headlong way will make trouble. Don't let us lose time on this, but act at once. And to-night! Silence him!"

The elder man raised his gaze, and the two looked each other in the face.

"Silence him!" repeated the commissioner, in a low voice.

"So I said. Silence him, and do it without delay."

Without further words the brothers continued to look, but they finally broke the gaze. Both looked down. The elder of the twain was very pale, and over Chesterham Payne's face came a deep flush. He suddenly rose and began to pace the room. Up came Robertson's gaze, and he watched for a moment; then he suddenly rose, moved forward and took his brother's arm.

Again they looked each other in the face.

"Silence him to-night!" repeated Robertson Payne.

CHAPTER XIV.

A FAIR TEMPTRESS.

It is not quieting to the nerves to wake from slumber and find the knife of an assassin at one's throat, and the man who can successfully meet such a person at such a moment has courage and self-possession of remarkable degree.

Such had been the experience of Nicholas Blackwood, and he had been shaken for awhile, in spite of his courage, but he recovered from the shock with commendable quickness.

With the assassin in his grasp he had the man on equal terms, and he did not weaken under the ordeal. Hand to hand and muscle to muscle they rolled over the floor, and the detective was encouraged to find he was not losing anything in the struggle. His life was at stake, and he was defending it.

Back and forth over the floor they rolled in the same silence, but the fight could not continue forever.

The back of the masked assassin suddenly came against the wall with considerable force, and Nicholas was not slow to improve the chance. He forced his man closer to the wall, and then gained the upper hold.

"I have you!" he exclaimed, triumphantly.

Victory did seem in his grasp, but the emergency gave the assassin new power. With an abrupt movement he forced his body upward, flinging Blackwood back, and then the detective rolled on the floor and the intruder was free. His knife had fallen from his grasp, and he did not seek to recover it. Evidently he had seen enough of the contest; he turned toward the window; he leaped out; he was gone from view.

Nicholas hurriedly rose and ran to the window. He was just in time to see the head of the assassin disappear from sight by the edge of the roof of the annex. He hastened to the roof, himself, but when he arrived at the edge the man had taken down the ladder by which he had gained the point, and was in retreat.

"Beaten!" exclaimed Nick.

He turned about, thinking to go down through the house to the street and try to capture the man, but stopped short.

"With the start he has he will be three blocks away before I can get out."

Calmly he retreated to his room. From there he took his time to go out. The assassin was not to be seen, and he saw no one of whom he could inquire. He went back to his room in a philosophic frame of mind.

The fight for life had not knocked over any of the furniture, so there was nothing to be put to rights, but there was one memento of the struggle.

He picked up the ugly-looking knife which had been so near to taking his life.

"A regular carving-knife, and well sharpened. I am glad he did not succeed in driving it into my body; it would have gone hard with me if he had. Only a human brute would use such a weapon!"

Nick was not thin-skinned, usually, but he shivered as he looked at the thing. Then he tossed it into a drawer and sat down.

"Who was this man?" he wondered. "He came to kill me—to remove me forever from this world. He nearly succeeded. Who was he? I don't know; his mask accomplished all it was intended for—I have no clue to his identity. Plainly, however, he was somebody who wanted to remove me because I was dangerous to him. It was somebody I have scared in my detective work, and he tried to silence me."

Long the detective meditated. If he formed an opinion he did not indicate the fact, but his use of the word "silence" was suggestive when it was known that Robertson Payne had used just the same word a few hours before. Nick did not know that. If his suspicions pointed to the Payne family he gave no sign.

He fastened his window and went to bed. Danger was no new companion of his, and he slept as well that night as if nothing out of the usual course of events had occurred.

In the morning he made no haste to get away from the house, and was eating a late breakfast when he was informed that a lady wished to see him in his private room.

This was not unusual, and he went to her without much curiosity. On his arrival he had a surprise; the lady was Irena Payne!

He stopped short, but she was in a light-hearted mood—or so seemed to be—and she moved forward quickly and gave him her hand.

"You did not expect to see me, did you?" she cried.

"I confess that I did not."

"I like to take people by surprise."

"You have succeeded, this time."

"I hope I am not unwelcome?"

"You certainly are not."

"I thought it time to return some of your visits."

"I agree with you perfectly."

"That is where you are wise; always agree with a lady."

Irena seemed to be very light and airy; more so than Nicholas had ever seen her, before. He was wise beyond his years, and as he set a chair for her, and tried to make her at home, he was full of wonder. That this call was to be explained by any ordinary theory he was sure was not the case.

She talked in the same mood for several minutes, and spoke of many things which did not interest Nicholas, but he was patient. He felt sure something was coming. He was right, but she was long in offering proof of the suspicion.

"I hope I am not keeping you from your duties," she finally remarked.

"Not at all."

"I was in this section, and could not resist the temptation to run in and see how a detective lived."

"This is a case where temptation should not be resisted."

"Are you still doing anything about that dreadful convict affair, Mr. Blackwood?" she asked, suddenly, as if the idea had just occurred to her.

"If you mean to ask if I have made progress, I can only reply, No. I have not been able to learn how he got to the city, or where he went between the time of arrival and his appearance at your home."

"Isn't it horrible?"

"It is, indeed."

"Such a shocking thing to have happen in one's home!"

"I regret it, myself."

"It seems to have broken up the order of your social calls on us, too, Mr. Blackwood. As soon as possible we hope you will renew them. We shall be glad to see you—my father, my uncle and myself. Come around and let us show the Payne brothers that you and I can still beat them at whist."

Cordial, indeed, was her manner, but Nicholas did not calouse. He had more than once enjoyed himself in the society of this woman, but he never expected to do so again. Now, he was very much of the opinion that she was seeking to draw his fangs by womanly blandishments.

"I think we can do it!" he exclaimed, looking as pleasant as he could.

"Of course we can. But I set out to ask you if you have found the tramp."

"The tramp?"

"Yes."

"What tramp?"

"Why, the one who killed Danny Fox, you know."

"Oh! was it done by a tramp?"

"Who else could have done it?"

"Just what I wish to know."

"It must have been a tramp, Mr. Blackwood. The theory has been mentioned, and it looks very reasonable. Don't you think so?"

"Perhaps you are right."

"I am sure I am. You see, a tramp came into the back yard just as Danny Fox did. Of course a tramp is always looking for something he can steal, and he made the effort then. He entered the house, and in the dark happened on Danny Fox. They fought, and Fox was killed. It is all very plain."

Irena was earnest of manner, and so much in earnest that her anxiety to convince Nicholas was very apparent.

"That is possible," he agreed.

"I am glad you agree with me, and now, can't you stop all the newspaper talk by saying so?"

"That it was done by a tramp?"

"Yes."

"Where is the tramp?"

"I don't know."

"He would have to be produced, to settle it."

"But you can give your opinion, and that would be enough. Just say that you know it was done by a tramp, and that'll be enough!" she repeated, with the persistency of one bound up in the subject.

"Would it not be well to wait until the tramp is found?"

"Mr. Blackwood, you don't know how painful it is to rest under the shadow of this thing; it is positively terrible; it is eating my life away. I want the shadow removed. Now, you are my friend, and you might do this for me."

Rising, the girl moved forward and laid her hand on Nick's arm. Her manner had grown beseeching, and her eyes glittered with suspicious moisture.

"I wish I could—"

"You can. Mr. Blackwood; you can. Please do it and set all talk at rest—for my sake!"

"But suppose I should find the criminal, and he should prove to be other than the tramp—"

"Oh! but it was a tramp; you said so."

"Pardon me; but I only admitted the possibility."

"Well, you think so, and so do I. Then why not announce it?"

"I repeat, if it should be the real man, and he proved not to be a tramp—"

"But it was a tramp, and he is probably miles away now. He will not be found. Why should he be? What good will it do to make more of a stir about this? Consider my position in life—and remember you are my friend! Let us avoid publicity! Now, why bother about this tramp? You will not find him, and if you do, it would only be more worry over a miserable, ragged wretch. Why not drop it? Let it go as a dead mystery, Mr. Blackwood. Do this for my sake!"

Irena had grown very much in earnest, and she poured forth the plea with rapid utterance. If her words were not eloquent, her manner was, and Nicholas stirred uneasily; it was as if she were pleading for her very life. Deeply was she moved, and the scene was painful in its intensity.

"Miss Payne," he replied, "I wish I could say 'Yes' to you, but my duty—"

"Does it count above your friends?"

"Duty counts above all things," he returned, gently.

"Do you refuse? No, no; you will not, must not refuse. For my sake say Yes! Say Yes, and spare me all this horror. I implore you, say Yes!"

She threw herself on her knees at his feet.

sympathies and make him turn a deaf ear to the calls of law and duty, but he was hardly prepared for the point to which the plea had reached. With Irena Payne at his feet he grew positively startled. Women had before shown the same feeling when his professional work brought them or their loved ones into danger from the heavy hand of law, but it was different with Irena—she was a personal acquaintance.

"Miss Payne," he exclaimed, "I beg of you to rise. This is—"

"No, no! I will not rise until you have given your promise!" she cried.

"But what you ask is impossible—"

"I only ask you to drop this case and let the miserable tramp go free. Spare me this publicity!"

"Miss Payne, I must ask you to rise—"

He lifted her to her feet.

"You are nervous over this matter," he gently added. "You have let your feelings carry you away; you are not acting with judgment—"

"I know well what I am doing. Let the case drop; for my sake. Let it drop. What do we care to punish the wretched tramp? Let him go—let the case drop!"

She was growing incoherent again, and Nicholas became so oppressed by the affair that he felt he must end it. He led her to a seat, and undertook to quiet her. With kind and pitiful manner, but with firmness, he indicated how impossible it would be for him as an officer of law to give up a case, and thus be false to all his principles, be the motive what it might.

It was a logical, friendly argument, but it did not succeed at once. Irena had come there to win if she could, and though her programme had not included such a wild appeal as she had made, she could not govern herself now it was begun.

She continued the appeals until worn out, and until the kind but steady firmness of her companion showed even her the folly of further words.

She ceased to speak and sunk into a chair, her lips quivering with emotion, and all things indicating the near approach to tears.

"Miss Payne," spoke Nicholas, in a subdued voice, "I am sorry to have disappointed you."

She made no reply.

"As a man, I would have said Yes to you, gladly, but I am an officer. I cannot act the unprofessional person in matters of duty."

"I shall ask you no more."

"I hope you are not offended?"

"I don't know."

"At least, you do not doubt my motives."

"I doubt all but myself. That is—well, I don't know what I do mean."

She rose abruptly.

"I will go," she added.

The detective did not care to detain her, but he spoke enough of kind words so that, when the door closed upon her, he could not feel that he had been cruel. Yet, he was pained and strongly moved.

"A trying scene!" he murmured, with a sigh. "Trying to me, and—what must it have been to her? What deep emotion was back of it all? Her passionate appeal, founded on intense feeling and made in agitation and vehement pleading— Well, well, it is a bad business. I wish I had not taken up the case!"

He did wish it from the bottom of his heart, and never before so strongly as then. This last visit, and the strong appeal had been to him more of evidence than ever.

At least one member of the Payne family had been painfully anxious to have the investigation smothered and dropped forever. Why?

Long did Nicholas walk the floor. Then he went to the drawer and took out the knife which had been left by the assassin of the previous night. He looked at it more closely than before, and something on the handle caught his attention.

It was two letters sunk in the brass ring which encircled the handle near its junction with the blade.

"R. P."

"A clue!" he thought. "Those letters were not put there by the maker; they were made afterward by order of the purchaser. 'R. P.' It is a clue; they must be the initials of—"

He stopped short. R. P. were the initials of Robertson Payne!

He flung the knife back into the drawer. "Accursed thing!" he cried. "Was not your owner sufficiently branded without your putting in an appearance?"

A new train of thought was started, and, with the knife as a suggestion, he meditated anew on the identity of the would-be assassin. Who was it? One thing seemed to prove that he was not a city tough, for Nick had found him far from strong or skillful. The unknown had made a fight which was spirited for a while, as any man would with so much at stake, but it had soon been over.

"He lacked good, solid muscle, or I might not have got off so easily. Can it have been Robertson or Chesterham Payne? Nonsense! Whatever they may have done to an avowed enemy, they would not either of them have come here as deliberate assassins. Yet, the knife!"

A period of meditation, and then an impatient, angry movement.

"Confound it!" he cried, "I wish I had been a thousand miles away when Danny Fox was killed, and still lingering there."

Rising abruptly the detective went out and commenced work. His mood had changed again, and he had no intention of giving up his quest for Danny Fox's slayer, so it would not do to act the part of idleness.

It was late in the afternoon when he received notice that he was wanted at the office of the superintendent of police.

He obeyed the call at once, and was received with the affability naturally accorded a faithful officer.

"Mr. Blackwood," said the superintendent, "I have decided to put you on the Matterson case. You heard of that murder, this morning, I presume?"

"I did, sir."

"You can take it up now. Devote all your energies to it, and try to get the guilty man at once."

"But I am on the Danny Fox case."

"I know it."

"I can't manage the two."

"Unfortunately, you can't, but you can manage the Matterson matter. It is by the special desire of Commissioner Payne that I give it to you."

"By Mr. Payne's desire?"

"Yes."

"Then he wants me to drop the Fox case, does he?"

"He finds the Matterson affair deeply interesting to him, and regards it as far more important than the Fox case. Thus, you are to be shifted. It is a compliment to your skill, Blackwood."

"Do you approve of the step?"

"The new case seems important enough to invite the attention of a good detective."

"But what about swapping horses crossing a stream? The Fox case must have a new man."

"Commissioner Payne thinks it may be trusted to any capable man without harm."

"Would you have done this without Mr. Payne's request?"

"Frankly, I would not. I am glad to have you on this new matter, but I should not have shifted you. It's Payne's wish, however."

Nicholas was silent, but he thought he knew why all this had come to pass. The Payne family was bound to have him out of the case in some way or another. Irena had failed, and this new departure had been the result.

The detective's last grain of faith in the family vanished.

He left the office with a feeling of regret. He had been saved from the annoyance of doing harm to the Paynes, but he had gone far enough with the case so that with the mystery of the whole thing, he was eager in one sense, if not in another, to continue.

When he arrived home he found a familiar figure near the door. It was that of Strike Maginnis, the bowling-alley boy.

"Been waitin' fer ye, boss," was the announcement.

"On business?"

"Yes."

"Have you made a new discovery?"

"I want a commission as a regular detective."

CHAPTER XV.

NICK HAS UPS AND DOWNS.

NAPOLEON NICK was well aware that a great effort was being made to work on his

"Indeed! I am afraid you will have to be content with the bowling-alley."

"Don't say that, now; don't! You hurt my feelin's. I want ter do some pipin' of Aleck Fox an' his crowd, an' I want ter do it legal. Ef I git arrested fer bein' too fresh, Marm Maginnis will larrup me with her Number Eleven brogans; an' ef she hits fer keeps the house will shake with my wailin'. See? I want ter pipe off Aleck, fer he is active. He an' Jack Lewton, an' a feller called Burke Jackson—he's a hanger-on of Lewton's saloon—are hustlin' around fer big game. I want leave an' license ter head them off."

"What are they doing?"

"Tryin' ter git the Paynes inter a box, ef I ketch onter their talk correct."

"How can they do that?"

"Aleck will have it that there was a deep secret between Danny Fox an' Irena Payne, an' that it was that which made the killin' of Danny done. I heard him say plain that the Paynes killed Danny ter hide the old secret."

Nicholas looked annoyed. Strike Maginnis's habit of using his eyes and ears had given him more of a clue to the situation than the detective was willing should be vested in such a small head.

Strike read the expression on his companion's face.

"Say, do ye think I ain't ter be trusted?"

"I hope you are."

"Well, you jest bet yer trottin' hosses that I be. No tell-tale about me. Let me inter the game an' you won't be sorry. Say, boss, Aleck, Jack an' Burke have hunted fer clues an' news in New York pretty sharp an' now they are goin' off ter Jersey, ter-morrer, ter see the minister there, ter ask him ef there really was anything in the rumor that Irena an' Danny was married. Can't you an' me head them off? It is jest vitally important, old man, that we get ahead o' them, unless we are ter let them win the case. See?"

Nicholas did see plainly. He had been intending to go to New Jersey on just this errand, but had postponed the matter. Clearly, the way to do was to get ahead of Aleck, if it was done at all.

And he was off the case!

At that moment the door of the house opened.

"A telegram is waiting for you Mr. Blackwood," announced the servant, holding out a paper.

"Let me see it," carelessly replied Nick.

He received and read the paper. It was brief, but of deepest interest to the reader. Signed by the superintendent of police it was in these words:

"MR. BLACKWOOD:—The Matterson case has been solved unexpectedly and by chance. The criminal is in custody, and you will please continue on the Fox case, as before."

Nicholas crushed the paper in his hand.

"Fate has come to my aid, and baffled the plot to remove me from the trail. Unless there is another move in the same direction, I am free to continue."

The detective turned to Strike Maginnis and added, aloud:

"Prepare to accompany me to New Jersey, to-night!"

CHAPTER XVI.

LOOKING TO THE PAST.

It was a village in the State of New Jersey, and Napoleon Nick and Strike Maginnis came to a stop near a neat little house.

"That must be Reverend Mr. Pongast's home," remarked Nick.

"I reckon it is," agreed Strike. "Now, boss, you go in alone an' talk ter the reverend gent. Ef I went I'd be sure ter ask him how he was on 'strikes,' 'spares,' an' other bowlin' alley things, an' he would set down on me hard. Go alone, Nick, an' I'll wait out here until you have knocked the pins over. See?"

"Your plan is good, and I will not keep you waiting long."

The detective went on, rung the bell, was escorted to the parlor, and was there speedily joined by Mr. Pongast.

He was affably greeted.

"I have come on business," announced Nicholas.

"I shall be glad to serve you, sir," replied the clergyman.

"Mr. Pongast, I am going to be frank with you. I am an officer—a detective."

"Indeed! I trust that nobody I know is in trouble?"

"You may rest easy on that point, sir; I do not think you have any real acquaintance with the parties of whom I am to speak. You have, sir, neighbors in the summer time in the shape of members of the Horatius Athletic Club?"

"Yes."

"Do you remember that one of the number, some years ago, was named Danny Fox?"

"Ah! you are on that case?" replied the minister, quickly. "I have been reading of it in the daily papers. Fox came to a violent end."

"He did, Mr. Pongast. It is not of that I would speak, however. Do you remember him when he was here three years ago?"

"Yes."

"What did you know of him then?"

"Practically, nothing."

"I have heard a rumor that you then married him."

"What! has that matter leaked out?"

"Then you really did marry him? May I ask the name of the bride, and what—"

"Stop, stop, my friend! Not so fast! I have not said that I married him, and for the very good reason that I did nothing of the sort. As far as I know, he never was married."

"Then why did you just exclaim: 'What! has that matter leaked out?'"

"Sir, you claim to be a detective, and I do not doubt your word, but I must ask you to convince me that all this is above-board, and in the interests of law and right. When you do that I will speak freely."

"Your caution is commendable," replied Nicholas, "and I can well be frank with you. I am looking to Fox's past life to see what he did, and whom he knew. It is essential to the interests of justice."

"You say there is a rumor that I married Danny Fox. Name the lady in the case, please!"

"Irena Payne."

"It is clear that you have enough so I need not hesitate to add the little that I know. You shall have the whole story. It is brief, indeed, and a mere fragment."

"The summer of which you speak was one when I often saw both the members of the athletic club, and the members of the Payne family, but with none of them did I have any actual acquaintance. Still, I knew them all by sight."

"One afternoon Daniel Fox came to me and said he wanted me to marry him to Miss Irena Payne, that evening. They were to come over in the early hours of darkness—nine was the hour for the wedding. As I did not see anything remarkable about the matter, I agreed just as I had before agreed in many similar cases."

"Nine o'clock came, but—the couple did not come. They never came. I did not marry them, for the reason that the appointment never was kept by them."

"Why not?" asked Nicholas.

"I don't know. No explanation was ever given me, and I think Miss Payne speedily left the vicinity. I never have known whether they declared the marriage off, or whether they were married by somebody else."

"Had you reason to think somebody else might have married them?"

"None whatever."

"Was it not very mysterious to you?"

"Well, perhaps it might be called so. Anyhow, they did not keep the appointment, or explain why they failed to come. With me, however, it was a matter of business—so much money lost," added the reverend gentleman, with a smile, "but no more."

"You have absolutely no theory as to why they backed out?"

"None. Yet, I remember that, at the time, I wondered if—"

"If what?"

"There was a tragedy, that night. To reach my house from where they would start they had to cross the river. At that time the so-called upper bridge had not been

built. No team could cross without going well below, to the main part of the village. That is two miles away. Pedestrians could cross near here by means of a foot-bridge. On that night this foot-bridge broke under the weight of a man who was precipitated into the river and drowned."

"Who was he?"

"Curiously enough—when we consider what Danny Fox came to—a convict. An escaped convict, sir. Little was known of him here. Why the foot-bridge broke under him I don't know; it did break, and with the result I have indicated."

"Why did you think he had any connection with their failure to appear and be married?"

"I did not say there was a connection. Of course they could not cross by the foot-bridge after it had fallen to the water. Once it was down they would either have to hire a boat to take them over, or go two miles to the main bridge."

"I see."

"I wondered briefly, I say, if this accident prevented their coming, but, of course, it could not have been that. If they had wanted to come they would have secured a boat and crossed by that means."

"Was it known, that night, that a man had been drowned?"

"If anybody knew it, it was not generally known. The body was discovered the next day, and, to the general public, that was the first intimation of a tragedy. As far as I know, nobody was aware of the drowning until then."

Nicholas began to feel that his errand was a complete failure, but he lingered long enough to question the minister considerably more. He turned and re-turned the soil, hoping to secure something from the field of the past, but he had to abandon it, at last, as useless.

Before he left he cautioned Mr. Pongast not to be too confiding with others, and the clergyman promised to heed the injunction.

The detective went out and rejoined Strike Maginnis. When the latter was told that nothing but failure had come of the call he was disconsolate.

"I'll bet that feller told a whopper!" he declared.

Nick did not think so, but strike was too much disappointed to be logical. They walked toward the river, preparatory to taking the train on their return to New York. As they neared the bridge Nick's mind wandered to the tragedy that had taken place there three years before. For a moment he asked himself if the drowning of the convict had influenced the intended marriage of Danny Fox and Irena Payne, but the possibility seemed so remote that he did not give it a second thought.

They were within a few yards of the bridge when he noticed a female figure approaching from the direction of the bridge. It was dark, and he saw nothing noteworthy in the fact, but Strike suddenly grasped the detective's arm.

"Cricky! do ye see that?" demanded the boy.

"What?"

"That's Irena!"

"Nonsense!"

"Kick me for a dump-cart hoss ef et ain't!" asserted Strike. "Git in out o' the wet!"

He pulled Nicholas to one side, and, screened by a row of trees which cast deep shadows, they stood still and let the lady pass.

"W'ot did I tell ye?" cried Strike, triumphantly.

"Was that Irena?"

"Course et was."

"So it looked to me, but it seems impossible."

"Don't ye let yer thinker play ye any sech trick as that. Irena et was, sure as gum is gum. Say, w'ot is she doing of here?"

Nicholas stood erect, all on the alert. He had recognized Irena, even if he was reluctant to believe it, and the fact filled him with amazement. What was she doing in New Jersey, and at such an hour?

Strike was growing nervous.

"Boss," he imploringly added, "be we goin' ter let her pass out o' sight an' we set down like dumb pins on an alley?"

"Most decidedly not," coolly replied Nick. "I know not what this means, but I am not foolish enough to miss such a bait. The girl is on some important errand; she does not suspect we are here, and we will follow where she leads. Come!"

Irena had turned from the road and was advancing across the field.

They began the pursuit, but it was not to be long. She reached a small, humble house; she knocked; she was admitted; the door closed behind her. Nicholas and Strike came close, and found they could use both their ears and eyes at an open window. This Nick proceeded to do without delay.

He saw a room which was a mere litter of old and useless things of one sort and another; he saw Irena and a bewhiskered, rough-looking man. No one else was present. That she was not safe did not enter the detective's mind. Rough as the strange man was, his face was the image of honesty.

"Well, well, well," the stranger was saying. "I would as soon have thought of seeing the President himself."

"I have come on business, Mr. Perkins," replied Irena, quickly.

"Business with me?" exclaimed the man, surprised.

"Yes, and here is proof of it," and Irena exposed a roll of money. "Mr. Perkins, I want to pay you to leave this part of the country forever!"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE MAN WHO WAS DROWNED.

NAPOLEON NICK started with surprise, but he quickly recovered and proceeded to act the part of a silent, attentive listener.

Perkins was even more surprised than the detective. Wide opened his mouth and eyes, and he looked at Irena blankly.

"Eh?" he cried. "You want ter—what?"

"Pay you to leave this part of the country forever!" she repeated.

"Great fishes! You don't mean it."

"I do. Will you go?"

"No, miss, I won't."

"See! here is five thousand dollars. It shall all be yours if you will go," declared Miss Payne.

"Five thousand—What, what? All that jest ter make me go away—Say, this is all a big joke!"

"Mr. Perkins, come to your senses as quickly as you can. Money revealed is proof of good faith. See for yourself! I do not jest, and all I promise I will do. Will you go?—go to California, for instance? Will you go at once?"

Irena had started coolly, but she had grown somewhat excited, and her words were poured forth rapidly. She convinced Perkins, too, and he ceased to act the disbeliever. He looked hard at the girl visitor.

"Want ter git me out o' the way, do ye?" he replied, musingly. "It must be I am dangerous. Gal, do you think I intend ter tell at this late day how the man was drowned in the river?"

"I have not mentioned that matter," Irena reminded.

"Of course that is it. I ain't so out o' the world that I ain't heard about how Danny Fox has been killed. I've took it all in, and it has occurred ter me that there might be some snoopin' around here when it was looked inter by a detective. But I ain't goin' ter tell—bless ye, no!"

"But you must go away—"

"Why should I? I say that I won't tell."

"You don't know how a detective can worry things out of a person."

"I'd like ter see one worry anything out o' me that I didn't want ter tell!" cried Perkins. "I ain't no weak sister, an' don't you think I be. Gal, you are perfectly safe. Did—did Danny Fox get so mean ye had ter finish him off?"

"Finish him off?"

"He was killed in your house."

"Oh! Mr. Perkins," cried Irena, "none of us harmed him. We don't know how he was killed; none of us had a hand in it. I do assure you. We are not so bad as that—even if I did once do a thing I am bitterly sorry for now."

"Gal, it was the hand of a kind Providence that made things go as they did that summer night, three years ago. If you an'

Danny Fox meant ter git married—an' I have always thought you did—Providence interfered to save you. Cheer up! You never meant ter do harm. It was Fate that saved you from marryin' Fox."

"I have not said I intended to marry him."

"I know you did, gal; I say it plain now. That night you an' he crossed the foot-bridge to go somewhere. After the bridge fell you an' he come ter me, an' got me ter row ye back across the river. Even from you I have kept a part of what I knew, that night, but, gal, I overheard you an' Danny talk when you didn't know it, after the bridge went down. Danny urged you to go on to the minister's an' be married as you had planned, but you refused. You said you would not do it, after what had happened."

"You heard that?" cried Irena, dismayed.

"I did, gal. You backed clean out—you did well, too, gal—an' I reckon you and Danny never got married after."

"We never did."

"Right! He was not fit for you."

"That dreadful night; that dreadful night!" exclaimed Irena, nervously.

"Yes, it was all o' that, but cheer up. You didn't mean ter do no harm. I seen it all—I told ye then that I seen the principal part. I was near the bridge when you an' Danny come over. I went to see if the road was clear ter the minister's so you an' he would not be seen on the way. He left you by the bridge—"

"I did not know it had been tampered with!" cried Irena.

"I know, gal; I know. It was an elopement, an' Danny was afraid you would be pursued. So he sawed the supports of the bridge so that under much weight it would fall. That was why you an' he come over singly, an' so careful."

"I didn't know."

"Wal, he left you by the bridge, an' then come the man along the same way, across the bridge."

"I thought he was a pursuer. Danny had talked to me of pursuit until I was horribly nervous, and I lost my head then."

"Yes, yes, poor gal; you did so! You thought him a pursuer, so you flung your weight onto him, and he fell from the bridge."

"Oh! the horror of it!" passionately cried Irena. "My heart seemed to stop beating when he went down off the bridge. I had tried to push him off, yet I had not realized what I was doing. He fell, though; he gave a cry of terror; he struck the water with a splash. He disappeared from my sight. He cried out once more, and then all was still. The darkness had swallowed him up, but I was in a panic. Danny came back, and I begged him to enter the water and rescue the unknown wretch. He would not go; he said the man had swam safely away before then; he ignored the whole matter."

"Jest like him!" growled Perkins.

Irena was keyed to a high pitch, and she went on feverishly:

"Danny tried to get me to go on to the minister's, but I would not go. I felt in my heart that the unknown man was dead, and horror was upon me. We came to you, and asked you to row us across the river. You did it, but you let me know you had seen me push the man off. You promised never to tell, though—"

"I have kept my word."

"I believe you have, for no whisper of suspicion has ever reached me. But, oh! the misery of the next day, when the body was found in the river. I knew then that the man I had pushed off had been unable to swim, and had been drowned."

"He was only an escaped convict, then, fleein' from justice?"

"He was a human being."

"Some might call him so," dryly remarked Perkins.

"Suspicion never got started. Nobody noticed that the bridge had been tampered with, and it was learned that the drowned man had been drunk when he fell. That seemed to explain all, and no whisper of foul play ever rose."

"Miss, you didn't kill him in cold blood?"

"Heaven knows I did not, but I killed him."

"It broke off the weddin' that night."

"It broke it off forever. I felt that the curse of Providence was on our plan, and I refused to listened to Danny's pleadings. We were never married."

"Did he come ter you in New York with threats?" inquired Perkins.

"I confess he did make threats—"

Thus far Irena spoke, and then she stopped short. The fascination of tragedy and the attraction of repulsion had made her speak freely of the old-time matter. In her unguarded speech she had practically admitted that she had seen Danny the night he was killed. Realizing that fact, she broke off suddenly.

Too late!—Napoleon Nick had missed nothing.

"You are well rid of him," continued Perkins. "Don't shed no tears."

"I have wandered from my subject. This money—"

"Now, now, gal, don't!"

"I will pay you to go away—"

"I won't be paid; I won't go; but yer secret I will keep forever. I see how you feel. Danny was killed in your house, an' you think suspicion may point ter you. people may ask, 'What motive could Miss Payne have had fer wantin' ter kill Danny?' Mebbe they will git hold of the rumor that you had married him. They will find it false. They will look for a further motive! They will come ter old Tom Perkins, the boatman. He will tell them that you pushed the man from the bridge. They will say, 'Here is the motive!' When Danny escaped from Sing Sing he went to the Payne house, saw Irena an' said ter her, 'Save me from the officer, or I will tell them how you pushed the man from the bridge over in Jersey!' That's what might be figured out of the old boatman, me, should tell an' he knows. Gal, I ain't no telltale; your secret is safe; nobody shall ever know you pushed the feller off!"

Irena fell on her knees before the grizzled old man.

"Save me, save me!" she cried. "I never meant to harm that man!"

"I know it; I know it, gal."

"It never occurred to me that he might not be able to swim. I was excited, nervous, horribly worried. Harm him? No, oh! no! Why should I? I tell you I was all confused that night. If I had not been, why did I push him off, at all? Why did I think he might harm me? I don't know—there was no method, no reason in my act. And I have bitterly repented it!"

Perkins gently lifted her.

"Be calm, poor child!" he soothingly murmured.

"Calm? How can I?" exclaimed Irena, wildly. "The life of that wretched man was taken by me! Innocent though I am, at heart, I am all black in reality. I am a murderess!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE NIGHT PROWLER.

BOATMAN PERKINS interrupted quickly:

"Nonsense, gal, nonsense. Don't say sech a foolish thing. You ain't nothin' o' the sort, an' I will not listen ter sech talk. It was an accident, at the worst, an' the work of a mere child. You wasn't as old then as you be now. Murderess? Pshaw, pshaw!"

Irena had exhausted herself with the vehemence of her feelings. She dropped into a chair, and Perkins remained over her, still uttering his soothing words.

Nicholas Blackwood stood like a statue by the window. Certain things had been made very plain to him. There had been no marriage between Irena and Danny Fox, but there had been reason why Irena should fear Danny.

For years he had kept secret the fact that she had pushed a man to his death in the river. Had Danny, himself, died because, hunted and desperate, he had threatened to speak out unless shelter was given him by the Payne family?

Nick had learned all he had come to New Jersey to learn. The mysteries of the past were made plain, and there was nothing secret, except the event of the recent days—Who had killed Danny Fox?

It was, in a measure, a shock to the detec-

tive to hear Irena confess that she had sent any man to his death, even by accident, but it explained the exact nature of the event of the past which had thrown its shadow on later days.

It seemed to furnish ample grounds for the violent removal of Danny Fox, if the Paynes saw fit to fight rather than succumb.

Gradually, Irena grew calmer, and she rose and proceeded with some system and composure to urge on Perkins her plan of having him leave the eastern part of the country, so her enemies could not find him.

Again Perkins refused. He declared he would not go, nor would he accept money for keeping quiet, but he asserted that not under any condition would he ever betray her in any degree.

"Rest easy," he added. "I shall not be called upon ter talk. No human bein' but you an' Danny knew that I rowed you an' him across the river, that night, or that I seen you push the drunken man from the bridge. You won't tell that I was in the game, an' Danny can't tell. Nobody will come ter me, an' I won't go ter nobody. Rest easy; the secret is buried deep."

"I wish I could believe it."

"You can; you are safe."

"But the truth may come out about the man who was drowned."

"No. Do you remember how the coroner set onter him? They said et was accidental drownin' when he was drunk, an' they give theit reasons. They seemed ter prove it. Remember? Oh! they won't take up that case ag'in."

He had convinced Irena. His kindness of manner was like that of a father, and she threw her arms around his neck, kissed his bronzed cheek, and burst into tears.

"Heaven bless you!" she sobbed; "may Heaven bless you!"

"He will, little gal, an' I won't lose nothin' by helpin' a feeble woman who ain't got nobody else she can go to in this matter. Be calm, little one; be calm. You are safe, an' your secret is safe, too. I should be a diabolical wretch ter give ye away. I never will, an' you kin rest easy."

The man was plain and rough, but he was kindly as personified, and his manner was wonderfully soothing. Under such persuasion Irena grew calm, and she finally dried her tears. Finding that he would not take her money, she gave him thanks, instead, and he repeated his promise of secrecy.

When she finally prepared to depart, Strike Maginnis whispered to Napoleon Nick:

"Say, hadn't we better skip?"

The detective started. He had wholly forgotten that the boy was with him.

They went a little distance away, and then Nick asked:

"How much have you heard?"

"Wal, boss, ef anything has escaped my trap you kin jest bet persimmons et ain't been said!" replied Strike.

"You have heard all?"

"Sure, Mike!"

"What are you going to do about it?"

"What you say. Me an' you are detective partners, an' I wouldn't go contrary ter orders ef they cut my tongue out. Ef you say keep mum, never a lisp will I howl."

"I do say so."

"I'm with you."

"Keep it in mind and you will lose nothing—"

"Hush! Here she comes!"

"Keep out of sight, and let her go past without mistrusting our proximity."

This plan was carried out, and Irena passed them, hastening toward the bridge. Nicholas felt sure the girl's business was all done, but he fell in behind her, to see if she did go direct to the railroad station.

She reached the vicinity of the bridge, and was about to step upon it when a man started out of the bushes which grew by the side of the road.

"Wot's yer hurry, young woman?" he asked.

Irena started nervously, and then tried to pass him. He blocked her way.

"This is a toll-bridge," he added, "an' the toll is a kiss. Pay before ye cross. See?"

He seized her in his arms before she could evade him, and was about to carry out his implied threat. She struggled in vain, and his lips were near her own when strong hands suddenly seized him in return.

"You scoundrel!" exclaimed the detective, "take a lesson and get out of here!"

Bodily the kiss-stealer was lifted, and then Nick flung him over the low side of the bridge. There was a moment of stillness, and then a heavy splash.

"Cricky!" cried Strike, "he's bound ter git a bath, whether he ever had one before or not."

The fellow had gone out of the game entirely, and Irena was free. She did not wait to give thanks, but started across the bridge on a run.

"Wal, that's cool!" exclaimed Strike. "She seems more afraid of us than she was o' him."

"She does not want to be recognized in this section. Do you think she recognized me?"

"Not much! She never took a look at you, but, the moment his grip was off from her, she seud like a young gazelle o' the wilds, b'jinks!"

"I hope you are right."

"I be. She wouldn't have known her own father, so excited did she get, an' so mighty quick did she run."

"Good!"

"But, say, do you know who you throwed over the banister?"

"No."

"Mister Burke Jackson, the tough member o' the firm o' Fox, Jack Lewton & Co."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"How came he here, I wonder?"

"Sent by Aleck ter spy out the land, mebbe."

"It is possible."

"Le's lay fer Burke, an' kinder swat him when he comes up out o' the wet."

"No, let the scoundrel go. We don't want to be recognized by him, either. To the station, Strike, and possibly we can go back on the same train with Irena and not be seen by her."

The plan worked well. On arriving at the station it was found that she had already arrived and was in the waiting-room. She was surprisingly cool, considering what she had been through, and it told how much of firmness and courage was in her nature.

Unseen by her they went back to New York on the same train with her, after which they saw her safely started for home on the Elevated Road, and then took their own way homeward.

Before leaving Strike Maginnis the detective offered him a five dollar bank-note as an incentive to silence, but it was refused. The boy declared that he was then a full-fledged detective, and would take no pay until it was earned.

"I ain't been round ter the bowlin'-alley lately," he added, "an' I reckon I am fired, but shoot that biz, anyhow! I'm out fer detective glory, an' you bet I'll keep mum, boss."

Nicholas began to think he had a jewel in the speaker, and that he was as trustworthy as he avowed himself, so, when they parted for the time being, he did not worry about Strike's fidelity.

Once more alone in his own room the detective did some thinking. The case had cleared a good deal. The mystery of the past was fully solved, and the only question to be settled was, who killed Danny Fox?

After a long period of meditation Nick rose and began to pace the room with thoughtful air.

"One would say the crime was fixed surely on the Payne family, but I am still puzzled by what has from the first been the weak point in the case. They took an unknown man away in a carriage; I know that. If they killed Danny Fox, why didn't they take his body away? It might have been done, and all traces of the crime removed. With the chance at hand they did not take it. Why not, if they were guilty?"

CHAPTER XIX.

A CONDITION OF PERPLEXITY.

A MAN walked out of a large, imposing-looking building, went to the nearest corner and there paused.

"Quite a change since I last walked the streets of New York," he murmured. "Then I was ragged, homeless, sick, par-

tially out of my head and moneyless. Now I am clothed and in my right mind, and crisp bills in my pocket tell of luxuries to be purchased. A most decided change!"

The speaker was Cassius Rand. He had left the hospital after one week's stay, and was as well as ever, it seemed.

The mystery of his entrance to that place remained unsolved. The mysterious man who had taken him there, and scattered money so freely, had not taken the trouble to call, or to ask after him by messenger or letter, and nobody knew who he was, for the name he had given was unknown at the place he had claimed as his address.

As there was no reason why Cassius should remain and use up the other three weeks for which the unknown had paid, this amount—ninety dollars—had been refunded to Cassius when he was discharged. It was much, everything to him.

For some time the adventurer walked on, and finally he began to feel weariness. He had never been a man addicted in any great degree to the use of alcoholic stimulants, but he thought a drink of whisky would now do him good. He entered a saloon, had the liquor, and then sat down by a table.

Hung on the wall by the table was a file of a daily paper. He took it down apathetically, and began to look at the printed matter. Unknown to himself he was looking, not at the latest issue, but at a copy several days old. He took no interest in that possibility, one way or the other, but his attention was suddenly arrested as he caught sight of suggestive headlines. They proved so attractive that he read not only them but the article which followed. Taken in its entirety, this was the article:

"THE ESCAPED CONVICT DEAD!"

"THE BODY FOUND IN COMMISSIONER PAYNE'S HOUSE."

"Last night the police force of this city was looking for an escaped convict who was wandering around the city. To-day they are looking at his dead body, and wondering over a most puzzling mystery. Danny Fox a former member of the Horatius Athletic Club, but more recently a life convict in Sing Sing, managed to escape from that institution. Now he is dead."

"Being duly warned, the police hunted sharply for him last night. He was not found. This morning the household of Chesterham Payne, one of the city police commissioners, was thrown into a panic by the discovery that a murdered man lay in their parlor. It was Danny Fox. It is not known how he was killed, or by whom, and it is a most bewildering mystery that he was found in Mr. Payne's parlor. Why did he go there? If he knew who lived in the house it would have been the place of all places, one would say, from which he would stay away."

"At the hour of going to press no more had been learned, and no trail tells how a man in convict dress could get into the house."

Cassius Rand whistled softly.

"The dickens!" he muttered.

Straight at the wall he stared for a moment. He found something in this article which not only interested but excited him.

"A convict found in a parlor!" he murmured. "Dressed in his prison garb. Well, that's peculiar. Where was this parlor? I wish there was more—"

He stopped short and looked at the date of the paper. He found that it was a week old. Hurried examination also showed that he had all of the issues between that date and the existing day.

"Ha! here's the means of following it up!"

He proceeded to carry out the plan formed, and then followed the case of Danny Fox as far as it was known to the newspaper. In the printed columns he found nothing more definite than the theory that a tramp had done the deed, but the facts known to the general public were there recorded, and he took them all in eagerly.

This done, he leaned back thoughtfully.

"By Jupiter! this must be the convict whom I saw!" he decided. "Men don't often escape from Sing Sing, and that two convicts should be wandering around the city at

the same time, dressed in tell-tale stripes, is impossible, or next door to it. Yes, it was none other than this Danny Fox whom I saw!"

A further period of thought, and then he turned to one of the papers and again hunted up a certain paragraph. It read as follows:

"It is not known at what hour the convict entered the house, for neither Commissioner Payne, his brother or Miss Payne entered the parlors after dark, and the servants assert that they did not go there, either."

Cassius Rand smiled.

"So none of the family entered the rooms after dark?" he muttered. "Well, I had a flighty head, that evening, but I well remember that a young woman who, according to the inventory of the human beings who lived there, must have been Miss Payne, came in, lighted the gas, was surprised by a man in convict garb, and then had an exciting scene with him. Nobody entered the parlors, eh? It strikes me that there is a little romancing in the worthy commissioner's mansion."

His thoughts wandered on.

"It begins to dawn on me that I know who took me to the hospital, though why it was done I don't know. Was I dangerous? Shoot me if I know! What did I see and hear in the parlor? As near as I can tell my senses sort of went back on me as I watched—anyhow all things came to an end with the girl talking to the convict. What happened next?"

It was something Cassius had pondered over when in the hospital. He tried again, but, if he had taken any active part in the affair, he could not recall it.

He remembered nothing beyond the time when he lay passive on the lounge.

"Now, just what did the convict and the young lady say?" he resumed. "He was trying to have her give him shelter. He first appealed to her sympathies, as I remember it, and then made threats. He was going to—What did he threaten to do, if she refused him shelter? Upon my word, I don't know, but it occurs to me that he claimed to have some secret of the past which he meant to spring on the public, if he was not taken care of. What was it? Did I hear?"

If he had heard he could not recall it, and all efforts proved to be a loss of time. Then he fell to wondering over the case. Knowing, as he did, that the statement of the Payne family that none of them had entered the parlors after dark was not true, he looked for a motive for the falsehood. They had not told the truth. Why? What secret had been back of it all?

Then there was his own mysterious removal to the hospital. He did not doubt that they had done it all, and he was puzzled to know why.

"Mr. Chesterham Payne is a police commissioner, yet I could almost swear he would not want the truth known about this. Can it be that he had a share in the killing? But if he did, why did he leave Danny Fox's body in his parlor? He easily carted me out, unseen by any tell-tale. He could just as easily have got the dead man's body out. If he is guilty, and knew it was in his house, why didn't he get rid of it, and so avoid exposure? Say, but this is confounded perplexing!"

It was all of that, and after awhile he gave it up for the time being. He had other things to do. The hospital no longer sheltered him, and he must look for new quarters.

As little as he knew localities, he was enough at home there to find the cheap part of the city. He went there and engaged a room which suited him. Then he went out, purchased a suit of common clothes, put aside the elaborate suit he had gained by his hospital experience, and donned the cheaper one.

His appearance underwent another change. Clad in a sack-coat that was none too good of fit, and topped off with a soft hat, he looked like a Southerner. His face had been shaven with the exception of a mustache and goatee, and his olive complexion added to the suggestion of tropical extraction.

He had come out of his illness with much better physical condition and appetite than was to be expected and when he went to the dinner-table he did not fail to do justice to the food placed before him. He found fellow-boarders, too, who impressed him as

being agreeable people, and one of them, a young woman who sat by his side, he found especially entertaining.

After the repast he entered the parlor and was there joined by the young woman.

They fell into conversation, and grew slightly confidential. He explained that he was a comparative stranger, out of work, and a candidate for something to do.

"Get a situation where you won't see anybody!" she quickly advised.

"Rather an unique suggestion. May I ask its meaning?" he replied.

"Human beings are too mean to be associated with."

"Have you found them so?"

"I have, of late."

"That is bad."

"Bad! It is enough to rattle an actress, and her cheek is pretty adamant. I've been accused of theft!" declared the young woman, with emphasis.

"How was that?"

"I'm a dressmaker, and a crowd of folks have seen fit to insinuate that I was a thief. They had to drop the charge, but it makes my blood boil. I, accused of theft!—I, Dolly Brown!—that's my name."

CHAPTER XX.

CASSIUS GETS NEWS.

THE listener was not aware that he had any strong interest in the matter, but he saw that Miss Dolly Brown was one of the kind of people who like to talk of their private affairs, be they agreeable or the reverse, so he humored her.

"Ridiculous!" he exclaimed.

"Of course it was!" replied Dolly. "I, a thief? Well, not much!"

"You say you were cleared, so it seems to be all right."

"It ain't all right!" asserted Miss Brown.

"I didn't say I was cleared; I said they had to drop it. You see, Mr. Blackwood told them there was no evidence against me, so they dropped it. That wasn't clearing me, but I was innocent."

"The real thief may be found."

"It was Mary Moss."

Cassius did not know who Mr. Blackwood or Mary Moss was, but he kept up the conversation.

"She has not confessed, though, I take it."

"No. But she is the guilty one. She accused me, and all on no evidence. Now, I wouldn't accuse anybody unless I knew they were guilty. Mary accused me, so she must be the thief. She is!"

"Why not have her arrested?"

"There isn't any evidence against her," replied Dolly, regretfully.

"I thought you would not accuse anybody without evidence."

"Well, I wouldn't, but I know it was Mary. You see, certain diamonds disappeared from the house. She said it must have been me who took them, just because I had been in the house. Why, I had no chance to take them, and she did. They came here to arrest me, but Mr. Blackwood said it wouldn't do, so off home went Robertson Payne."

Dolly was not the most coherent and concise of narrators, but she had arrested Cassius Rand's interest, at last.

"Who?" he asked.

"Robertson Payne. I told you—Didn't I say it was in the house where Danny Fox was killed?"

"No, you did not."

"My, oh! my; how rattled-headed I am! Well, it was right in that house where Danny Fox was killed—the house where Commissioner Payne lives with his brother—You've heard about Danny Fox being killed, ain't you?"

"I read of it; no more."

"Well, I can tell you all about it."

Dolly was given to exaggerations, and this was one of them. She could not "tell all about it," but she could tell what she knew, and was eager to do it. Her information revealed but little more than the daily papers had told, except that she dwelt on the accusation brought against her on the strength of Mary Moss's charge.

"I don't believe Robertson Payne made much out of his call here!" snapped Dolly.

"I told him to his face that it was to get me out of the way, so I could not tell against them for killing Danny Fox, that he accused me."

"But what could you tell?"

"Well, nothing, exactly, but I scared Payne awfully. He got as pale as a ghost, and he was right glad to let me off. Say, but I do believe he knows just who killed that miserable convict. All of the Paynes told Blackwood—he's the detective, you know—that they did not go into the parlors, that evening, and I know they lied. I saw them all go in."

No passive listener had Dolly then. Cassius Rand recognized the fact that it was an odd chance which had brought him thus into contact with a person who had slept in the Payne house the night when he so unceremoniously took position on the lounge, and he was disposed to make the most of it.

Without betraying his own part in the least, he cross-questioned Dolly at considerable length on the subject, and gained all the light he could.

When he was alone again he meditated on the events of the last few days. He was not inclined to meddle with another person's affairs, and would not have interested himself in this case had he not felt that he had some right to do it.

Unless all signs went for nothing, it was the Paynes who had taken him to the hospital. Why had they done it?

If people find a total stranger making free in their parlor at night they do not usually show him much kindness. Why had he been taken to the hospital, supplied with good clothes and furnished with money enough to make him feel rich?

"Did I see more than I remember?" he wondered.

It was a question he could not answer, but it was not so startling as that which followed on its heels:

"What if I grew active after my senses left me?—what if it was I who killed Danny Fox?"

He started to his feet in trepidation, and then sunk back with a laugh more nervous than natural.

"Nonsense, nonsense! Such a thing is absurd. Yet—yet, men often do violent things in their delirium, and never know of it, afterwards. Can I have slain Danny Fox, innocently but surely—Pshaw! I will not think of such a thing; it is absurd!"

So he tried to decide, but the notion which had suddenly come to him was so disquieting that he finally rose abruptly and went out of doors. He felt that he wanted fresh air.

He was walking along when sight of a corner place of business gave him an idea.

"I reckon a milk-punch will do me good just now. I have been all over the world and found out that a man of mettle need not resort to liquors when well, as the Miss Daisy dudes of cities do when in such a mood that they drink for pleasure, but I need strength now. A milk-punch will give it to me."

He entered the saloon, called for his drink and sat down to imbibe at his leisure.

He did not at first notice that he was at a table near two other men, and they did not heed him, but he had not been there long before a third man, who appeared to be the proprietor of the saloon, advanced to the two and sat down. He lowered his voice, but not so much that keen-eared Cassius Rand failed to overhear him.

"Anything new about the Payne case, Aleck?" he asked.

"No," sulkily replied one of the men.

"Have you been over in Jersey?"

"Yes."

"What luck?"

"None."

"No trail?"

"Not a bit."

"Did you see the minister?"

"Yes, but he swears he did not marry Danny and Irena."

"Well, you said from the start that you did not think they ever were married."

"Yes, for Danny always said they were not."

"Then why are you so disappointed, Aleck?"

"Well, I hoped for something."

"And got nothing?"

"Not a thing."

The third man had thus far been silent, but he now broke in:

"Well, I got somethin'. I went over a night ahead, by Aleck's orders, to make sure the minister was still there, and when I was near a bridge I seen a sweet rustic gal comin' along—I reckon she was sweet though I reelly couldn't tell whether she was white or black—an' I thought I'd have a kiss. I grappled ont'er her, when all of a sudden up come a man, seized me an' slung me inter the river. I got wet as a rat."

The saloon-keeper laughed merrily.

"Served you right, Burke Jackson. How dared such a beauty as you aspire to kiss a girl?"

"Et wouldn't hurt me," growled Burke, not in the least angered.

"It would be a hospital case for her."

"Come, Jack Lewton, no levity," requested Aleck. "My whole mind is on the case in hand. Remember that Danny Fox was my brother."

"I know, Aleck; I know. Cheer up, though; you will get square."

"So I will, and the Paynes will pay dearly for their work. I don't suppose Nick Blackwood will ever again sight the guilty ones, but I will. I am dead sure Danny was killed by the Paynes."

"Of course he was," agreed Burke. "This newspaper talk about a tramp who come in an' did et is all rot."

"Right!" exclaimed Jack Lewton. "Did you ever know a newspaper to get anything correct? Nowadays, a reporter is not on a paper to get the news for readers—he simply goes crazy when there is a crime to be unraveled, starts out as a detective, guesses wildly at things and generally slops over."

"How do ye intend ter proceed, Aleck?" inquired Burke.

"I don't know, yet."

"If you could only find somebody who was there when it was done," suggested Jack.

"Useless, I suppose."

"Danny is silent forever."

"Yes."

"Probably no other witness."

"Would ye pay well fer pointers?" asked Burke.

"Of course."

"Wal, let me take the case."

CHAPTER XXI.

CASSIUS FINDS SOMETHING.

BOTH Aleck and Jack had to smile at this proposition. Mr. Burke Jackson might have been a shining light as a political heel, ballot-box stuffer, tough and loafer, but, with his ill-favored face and slouchy appearance, he did not fill the ideal detective.

Aleck answered seriously after a pause.

"Find out anything, Burke, and I will pay you well."

"I reckon Burke wants to raise a fiver, now," hazarded Jack with a smile.

"Not much!" retorted Burke. "I may not be rich, but I don't get nothin' on false pretenses."

Lewton whistled softly.

"Well, Burke," pursued Aleck, "I may want you more in this case. As I said before, I know the Paynes were the ones who killed Danny. All I need now, is proof of it, and that's what I'm out for. I'll give them their fill of fighting the Fox family, and they'll find they are not dealing with poor Danny. I'll fix them!"

The Horatius athlete extended his brawny arm and tapped it significantly with a finger of the opposite hand, adding:

"If the law can't be invoked, this arm will avenge Convict 2,009!"

"Good!" cried Burke. "You're a dandy, an' I'm wid ye from the start ter the finish. We'll win in the last furlong, ef not before."

All this had been heard by Cassius Rand, but as he saw the men beginning to get ready to break off the talk he edged away. He did not want to fall under their suspicion.

Leaving the saloon, he walked on slowly.

"I am getting into this matter quite encouragingly," he remarked, thoughtfully. "I know something about the friends, as well as the enemies of the lamented Danny Fox. So it is thought that the Paynes had a

motive for removing Danny from this world of troubles? I wonder what it was? I have gone from Canada to Patagonia, from Moscow to Cape Town, and from Suez to Burma without ever meddling with anybody else's business, but the way I have been chucked around in this case has made me curious. I wonder what it all means? Can I find out?"

For a considerable time he meditated on these self-questions, and, then, seeing it was still early, he determined to have a look at the vicinity of Robertson Payne's house.

Finding the name and residence in the Directory, he took a street car and rode uptown. It was a slow means of travel, and, when he came opposite to Central Park, the beauties of that noble place induced him to alight and walk along the pavement which bordered the east side of Eighth avenue, next to the Park wall.

He had gone a considerable distance when he was brought to a stop by the sound of distress of some sort.

"A woman weeping!" he murmured. "Where is it?"

This question was not hard to answer. The sound came from the walk inside the Park, close to the wall, and he had the curiosity to look over. Owing to the darkness, he could see nothing except the outline of two figures well below him.

"A lovers' quarrel," he thought. "It need not interest me."

He was about to move on when he saw the couple separate abruptly. The woman went North, her form easily seen because of the light stripe of white which adorned her dress.

He resumed his own way, but, now and then, the unknown woman was to be seen through the darkness. She soon emerged from the Park, and he saw that she was young and rather good looking. This did not interest him, and he would have forgotten her speedily had she not taken the very street through which he must turn from Central Park West to reach the home of Robertson Payne.

Thus, without design on his part, he followed her.

Two blocks she went, and then paused for a moment, looked around, hastened on the quicker, entered the area, and disappeared in the house. Cassius reached the same spot, looked up at the number and then grew surprised.

"What! is it Payne's house? Now, this is singular. I have unconsciously followed one of his household home. Who she is I don't know, but she does not seem like a lady of high degree. A servant, probably, and—"

He stopped short in his musings. The front door of the house had opened abruptly, and a man came down quickly.

Cassius was directly in his path, though not in his way, and the two men looked at each other. The second man stopped on the steps, and Cassius saw a singular expression come to his face.

"Who is this?" wondered the adventurer. "I seem to have scared him."

It was not a wild guess, for the man did seem troubled, to say the least. His regard was not of the commonplace sort.

Cassius was tempted to speak, but he thought better of it, and there he stood like a post. He was not long to have companionship. The second man recovered from whatever emotion had made him stop, stirred into life, took a step away, and then walked off quickly, without a word, or further look, or, for that matter, any undue appearance of haste.

Cassius Rand was not slow of wit, and he understood the situation in part, if not wholly.

"One of the Payne brothers!" was his unspoken verdict. "He knew me, too. More, I think I scared the shoes about off from him."

Not being of the skulking order, the adventurer did not linger near the house, and, seeing nothing of interest, he walked after his recent companion. The latter had disappeared, and was seen no more, but Cassius went to the avenue, and there verified the belief that he had just been by the house to which he had gone in his illness, a week before.

He saw the break in the line of houses

through which he had gone to the backyards. He went no further; he felt sure that it would not now be safe ground to travel.

After what had occurred the yards would not be left unguarded.

"Mysterious night!" he murmured. "What was then done? What did I do? Who killed Danny Fox? What was I doing when Danny was killed?"

A policeman approached and eyed Cassius sharply, but the adventurer put on his most innocent look and bore the scrutiny well. He could well understand that the police were very alert, after such things had occurred in the household of a man like Commissioner Payne, but he believed he could give this patrolman some points on the commissioner which would be worth more than cying harmless pedestrians suspiciously.

When the guardian of the night had moved on, Cassius retraced his steps, again passing the break in the row of the houses. When at that point his attentive eyes noticed something which made him step quickly from the sidewalk to the plain earth beyond.

He picked up an object and surveyed it closely.

"A fine ring, with a still finer diamond," he muttered. "Truly, this is better than the fields of Brazil. I've found diamonds there, but never one that was already set. Somebody is a mourner because of this. It is good for about two hundred dollars, if its full value can be got out of it. Really, my luck is looking up, and it does not matter so much if a shipwreck did make me a beggar just before I struck New York. I only hope it is not a stolen ring, for I do not want to be arrested in seeking to realize on it."

Footsteps sounded close at hand, and he was about to put the ring away when he saw that, the steps having been light, the other pedestrian had approached near before he heard anything. In fact, looking up, he saw a young woman now standing still, and staring at the ring.

Cassius had a surprise; she was the person he had heard weep, and had followed to the house of the Paynes.

Something in her face—an intense interest, and, he thought something akin to agitation—made him promptly alert.

He obeyed an impulse and held out the ring.

"Isn't it a beauty?" he coolly asked.

"You—you—What is it?" she stammered.

"Seems to me like a ring."

"Is it yours?"

"Whose should it be?"

"Where did you get it?" she added, quickly.

"In Paris," was his calm reply.

"When?"

"Oh! a fortnight ago."

"Ah!"

She drew a deep breath, and seemed to throw off a load. He was not disposed to drop a subject so singularly started in upon.

"Did you ever see one like it?"

"I?"

"Yes, you."

"No, no; I never did."

"Humph! Why did you stare at it as if it was a tiger that might jump out of its box?"

"I stare at it?" cried the girl, suddenly coming out of a dreamlike mood, and growing alert with the awakening. "I did nothing of the sort. I only noticed the stone, and—and I admired it."

"Would you like it?"

"Yes, yes!" and her hand was reached out.

"Pardon me," he remarked, dryly, drawing it back, "I never give presents to ladies on short acquaintance."

The rebuff was enough to cast off all of her unpractical mood, and she abruptly turned away.

"I must go!" she exclaimed.

She did go, leaving Cassius gazing curiously after her. Then he shrugged his shoulders and laughed lightly as he walked on his way.

CHAPTER XXII.

A LION AROUSED.

MISS IRENA PAYNE was seated in her room, the next day, when a servant came to her with the announcement:

"A gentleman to see you, Miss Irena."
 "Who is it?" was the reply.
 "He sent no card, but said his name was Mr. Elton."

"I never heard of him. Did he give his business?"

"No."

"What does he look like?"

"A perfect gentleman, miss, and oh! so strong!"

The reply brought a faint smile to Irena's cheeks. She decided to see the man, though well aware that the judgment of some servants on what constituted a "perfect gentleman" was not always reliable. She went down and entered the parlor.

She then saw at once why no card had been sent. The caller was Alexander Fox.

Recognizing him she first stopped short, and then made a move as if to leave the room, but the athlete sprung to his feet.

"Miss Payne!" he exclaimed.

She arrested her retreat.

"Well, what is it?" she asked, ungraciously.

"I wish to speak with you; I want to see you on business. I beg that you will accord me audience; I will not trouble you."

He was civil enough on the surface, and, though she wanted nothing to do with Danny Fox's brother, she decided that the simplest way was to give him the desired audience. She silently motioned to the chair he had just vacated, but Aleck knew enough of the ways of polite society not to sit down until she had set the example. This she did, and then the two confronted each other a worried expression on Irena's face.

Seeing his object attained, the athlete began to grow sour of visage, and his voice had a sullen intonation as he commenced:

"You can guess what brought me here, Miss Payne."

"On the contrary, I cannot surmise."

"It's about Danny—about Convict 2,009."

"Why do you come to me?"

"Miss Payne, Danny was my brother. I'm not a demonstrative man, and I never gushed over Danny when he was alive, but he was my brother; he was my mother's son. The ties of blood are strong."

Alexander was trying to be pathetic. He was not a great success in that line, but he had done his best.

"I can well believe you feel for him," answered Irena.

"I do, indeed; I feel it keenly. He's dead, and I don't see that there is any progress in avenging his death."

"The matter is in the hands of the best detective in New York."

"What has he learned?"

"I do not know. Possibly he would tell you. I can't tell, for I don't know."

"Is he getting help from here?" sharply demanded Aleck.

"Help from here?"

"Yes."

"How can we help him? Isn't it enough that my uncle, Commissioner Payne, has put a first-class man on the task?"

"No, it ain't enough!" cried the athlete, quickly. "He may work until doomsday and never get the clue unless he has more from here than a commission to do work. He needs help from those who know how Danny died."

The visitor was growing ugly, and Irena scented the storm. She had grown pale, but she tried to remain calm.

"I presume he will find those who know."

"I presume he will not, unless he looks right in this house!" cried Aleck. "You folks are pulling the wool over his eyes, but you can't over mine! All the Payne family know how Danny died. Mind you, I don't say he was killed without some provocation—I don't know as to that—but I do know who had a motive for killing him!"

"Why do you come to me—"

"Because you are the one of all others but me who ought to be interested. Danny loved you!"

"Sir?"

"He loved you, and you loved him—once!"

"Absurd!" cried Irena, but her voice shook.

"It is true."

"Why, I hardly ever saw him."

"You know the country episode. So do I! I know that when you was with Danny

certain things grew out of it; I know you held him in fear; I know you did not come to the Horatius Athletic Club, lately, without an object; I know there is a story in the past."

Alexander rose. He had lost his calmness, and the words came hotly and emphatically. His face was flushed, and his athletic form looked like that of a gladiator about to make an attack. Irena was deeply moved, but she did not lose her composure as much as was to be expected. Possibly, she had heard no more than she was prepared to hear.

"You talk wildly," she answered.

"Do you call it that? What of the episode in New Jersey?"

"Well, what of it?"

"You know what happened there."

"I know I met you and Danny Fox—no more."

"Woman, you lie!" angrily cried the athlete.

"The code of gentlemanly conduct in the circle you frequent reveals itself."

"You dodge the point. What of New Jersey?"

"You deny all I say; answer your own question. What of New Jersey?"

"Perhaps you think I know nothing."

Irena did think so. She was frightened by the visit of this man, but she remained cool enough to reason that if he did have information, he would not so beat around the bush.

She rose haughtily.

"I think you are ridiculous," she answered. "You evidently wish to vent spite on somebody, so you have come here. You know very well that there is nothing in your accusations."

"I know that Danny was killed so he could not tell of the past."

"Nonsense!"

"More, I say he was killed by the Payne family!"

"Scoundrel, you speak an infamous falsehood!"

The words were flung vehemently at Alexander Fox, but they did not come from Irena. Instead, it was a male voice that so strongly accused the athlete, and when Aleck wheeled he saw Chesterham Payne.

The commissioner marched with heavy steps to the middle of the room, and then forcibly added:

"Viper, you are not man enough to vent your venom on a man, instead of a woman!"

The sport was not used to being addressed in such a way, and his face flushed again. He was not ready with a reply, however, and Mr. Payne proceeded:

"It is not singular, sir, that you feel keenly over your brother's death, but it is no excuse for language like yours."

"So you know me?" replied Aleck.

"I easily recollect you as one of the company at the summer resort."

"And brother to Danny Fox."

"Yes."

"More, you are a police commissioner of New York."

"Yes."

"Don't you think you are in a pretty business?" insolently demanded Aleck.

"What business?"

"Killing a man."

"Sir," retorted Mr. Payne, quickly, "what do you mean?"

"My brother was killed in this house. I know who did it, and why it was done. So you thought to save your niece by murdering an unfortunate man."

Chesterham Payne's brow was knit in a deep frown, and his hands twitched nervously, but he maintained surprising calmness.

"Be plain!" he requested.

"I will. I say that Danny was killed to hide Miss Payne's guilty secret!"

"Her secret? What secret?"

"I don't know; I wish I did. But this much is sure; she did have a guilty secret, and Danny was slain so he could not tell it. All of your family were in the killing, and it was done because this woman had a secret which could not bear the light of day!"

Irena was leaning against the piano, weak and dismayed, but her uncle did not once look at her. His face was dark with emotion, and he fairly hurled his tempestuous retort at the athlete:

"Villain, you lie!"

He had taken a step forward, and with his face close to that of Aleck Fox he added, hotly:

"The trail of the viper is over all the Fox family, it appears. Like one, like the other. Beware that you don't bring up where Convict 2,009 did. As for threats, here, they fall on ears that heed them only as the howling of a wolf is heeded. Coward! to come and speak as you have done to a woman! We have no secret to hide, past or present, and we know not who killed Danny Fox. We will not have you accuse us further. Dare to act the bully further and I will throw you out of the house! I have learned your caliber, and know how to deal with you. What you need is a flogging, and you are liable to get it!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

TROUBLE COMES IN PAIRS.

THE athlete stared dully at the speaker. He had all of the pride of an ignorant nature in his brute strength, and he had generally found others ready to appreciate his prowess and avoid quarrels with him. Among his acquaintances his renown as an athlete had always been taken as proof that he would be a man whom it was not wise to provoke to hostilities, so he had gone on as a conqueror.

Now he was amazed that this rich man should thus address him. True, Mr. Payne was of muscular development, himself, but he was considerably Aleck's senior in years, and the athlete had the usual belief of his kind that no man not in athletic training could dream of holding his own with one who was trained.

Consequently, it was simply a bewildering circumstance to him when the commissioner spoke so decidedly.

He was slow to reply, and he stammered when he did reply.

"You—you speak of a flogging!" he gasped.

"I did!" was the short, sharp answer.

"Who would give it?"

"I would!"

Aleck Fox stood dumfounded again.

"Do—do you know who I am?" he finally asked, in a thick voice.

"A man whose muscle has run away with his brains! That's nothing to me; muscle is more easily beaten than brains, any day."

The athlete continued to gaze wonderingly at this audacious man, but he was calm enough to remember that it was a police commissioner he had to deal with then. He tried to be prudent, remembering that he had a greater object than to worst a man in physical combat. He forced an unnatural laugh.

"We won't go into an argument about brains, as I don't see that it concerns the business in hand. All I want is justice."

"It is just what you do not want; it would land you in Sing Sing!" retorted Payne.

"It won't carry me to the electric chair, as it may some I know of—meaning you!"

"Mr. Fox, make yourself plain. What do you assert against me? We need not wander and waste words. What charge is there against us?"

"Perdition! what's the use of saying it all over? I did not come here to see you, or I should—"

"You do see me."

"Yes."

"Well, deal with me then. What do you charge against us?"

"That you killed Danny—"

"Prove it!" interrupted Payne.

Angry words were on the sport's lips, but he realized how useless it would be to utter them. He had come to frighten Irena, and he knew he could make nothing by talking with the cool commissioner. Instead of accepting the chance to talk, he moved toward the door.

"What now?" asked Payne.

"I'm going to get out; I've had enough of useless talk. Yes, I'll go, but don't you think it's the last of me. Danny is dead, but I still live, and my life will be devoted to finding out just who killed him. Remember that!"

Aleck felt that his forces of battle were not in the best of condition, and, like a good general, he decided to retreat while he could. This he did most unceremoniously. Turning, he marched out of the room rapidly,

and his exit was continued until he had left the house wholly and banged the street-door to after him.

Once on the sidewalk he indulged in some mental congratulations.

"I didn't expect to see Payne there, and I am lucky to get off without an arrest. If he had been sharp I should have been taken in—Oh, no, I would not, on second thought; he didn't dare to do anything of the sort!"

The sport nodded sharply as he considered this idea.

"He didn't dare!" was his addition.

The athlete had been considerably perturbed by Payne's threat to flog him, and it touched his pride not a little, too, but he felt that he had some consolation—he had frightened the commissioner, he felt sure.

"The whole thing is just as I had sized it up; the Payne family were all in the plot to kill Danny. How can I prove it? What can I do to get the evidence? I must—I will get it somehow!"

In the meanwhile the commissioner and his niece had been left alone in the parlor. The dark frown on Payne's face told how much it hurt him to be addressed in his own home as the athlete had addressed him, and when Aleck was fully gone he took two turns across the room. Then he paused near Irena's side.

She was standing with downcast eyes. Deeply shaken she seemed to be. Was it because she expected allusion to be made to the charge that she had had a secret in the past, in common with Danny Fox?

Commissioner Payne spoke in deliberate tones.

"Justice would call for chastisement of this insolent fellow," he remarked, "but we must remember he is suffering from the shock of his brother's death. Of course he should not be held so strictly accountable as if he had not met with such a loss."

"Certainly not," agreed Irena.

"His violence here was reprehensible, but his mind is upset."

"Yes."

"Vicious as is his circle of life, we should remember that."

"Of course," replied Irena. "Uncle, I think we had better pay no further attention to it."

"That is my idea."

"He really meant no harm."

"Of course not."

"It was simply a case of poor judgment."

"Yes. No more could be expected from one in his position of life."

"That is it, exactly. We can afford to ignore him."

The picture at that moment was pitiful in the extreme, if they did but know it. Both talked glibly, but they looked, not at each other, but at the floor, avoiding a direct meeting of glances as if ashamed to do so. It was a curious state of affairs to see them both eager to find excuses for a man who had used such language in their home.

Chesterham Payne did not delay in the room. He talked glittering generalities for awhile, and made words without ideas until he saw fit to stop, and then he walked out of the room.

Perhaps both he and Irena would have denied the fact, but it was true that they had skillfully avoided anything like candid discussion of the subjects which seemed most to concern them.

Commissioner Payne went up-stairs, and there was hailed by his brother from the latter's private room. He entered and found Robertson holding a paper in his hand. The elder Payne looked haggard and worried.

"Read this letter," he directed.

Chesterham looked first at the date; it was recent. Then he glanced at the signature; it was that of Dolly Brown.

The letter read as follows:

"MR. ROBERTSON PAYNE:—

"SIR:—On a recent occasion you visited my home, and then and there accused me of being a thief. You said I had taken things from your house—diamond rings, and the like. Before you left the house you admitted that you had no proof against me, and that you could not connect me with the purloining of any article from your premises.

Appearances indicate, however, that you have done considerable talking in connection

with this matter, for I find that others know of your accusation. Such being the case, and the charge being, by your own confession, unsupported by anything like proof against me, I request you to make due contradiction of the rumors now afloat.

"There is but one way to do this; namely, to write a letter to the newspapers stating in unequivocal terms that the rumors are unfounded, and that you know me to be innocent."

"Unless this is done I shall write to the papers and tell what I know of the night when Danny Fox was murdered. I know that the Payne family has lied about the matter freely. You all said you did not go into the parlors that evening after dark. It was false!"

"I saw Miss Irena Payne in the back parlor after dark, with the gas lighted, and I saw both you, and Chesterham Payne enter the front parlor at half-past ten. What object has led you all to speak falsely on this point I leave you to say; it does not concern me."

"The murderer of Danny Fox is wanted, and it is my duty to tell all I can. What I can tell is this—that the Payne family lied about the case, and that each of the three members was in the parlor, as before stated."

"Unless you tell the newspapers that I am innocent I shall tell all I know. What is your answer?"

"Understand one thing in this! I am not to be bought off. Not under any condition will I accept one cent from you. I am no blackmailer—more, I will not sell my soul for money. I will not be bought off."

"I hope you will answer this at once, and thus save me the labor of writing to the papers. What is your answer?"

"DOLLY BROWN."

Commissioner Payne looked up and met the worried gaze of his brother. Even then he noticed the haggard aspect of the elder man's face, and it told plainly of ill-health, physical or mental.

"Well?" eagerly asked Robertson.

"What, Rob?" was the gentle reply.

"What do you make of it?"

"The note of an impudent young woman."

"But her demand, her demand?"

"Cannot be complied with, of course. At this stage of affairs we do not want to advertise ourselves any more than has been done already; we must not. To write a letter to the newspapers, as she requests, would be to call a horde of hungry reporters down on us. It must not be done."

"Then she will keep her threat."

"I think not."

"But she says so."

"She has tried to advertise herself at our expense. Dolly Brown's dressmaking business would, she thinks, have a boom if she could get such a letter as she asks for. But do you think, when we have merely suspended, not withdrawn, the charge against her, that she will invite a renewal of a charge which may not be baseless?"

"You never can tell what a woman will do!" sighed Robertson.

"Dolly Brown will not do what she asserts. But, Rob, I think she has found an adviser who is responsible for this. Somebody—a man, probably—has urged her on to do this. The refusal to take money is but a cunning trick to make herself safe; she wants money, and that is what this means."

"Then we will pay her—"

"Not a cent!" firmly replied the commissioner. "I can't afford to have my official position jeopardized. We will defy Dolly Brown!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

ANOTHER MYSTERY OF PAYNE HOUSE.

ROBERTSON PAYNE shook his head gloomily.

"I think we had better pay this woman to keep silent," he replied.

"Not a cent!" declared the commissioner, firmly.

"Then she will talk!"

"Let her do it. We will not submit to blackmail."

"Better that than to have her busy tongue moving."

"No. Blackmail is the worst evil that

can befall any human being, and, once in the clutches of such a person, there is no more peace for the victim."

"You may be right."

"I am."

Chesterham Payne tore the letter into small pieces.

"Exit, Dolly Brown!" he added.

Robertson Payne did not reply, but sat gazing gloomily at vacancy. It might have relieved him somewhat if he had known that he did not have to deal with anybody who was scheming to blackmail him. Dolly Brown was a young woman with a tongue and a mind rather too much given to what she considered defense of her rights, but she would not have descended to blackmail under any condition.

The commissioner turned his gaze on his companion and studied his worn face for some time. The result was a heavy sigh on his part, for he saw that ill health and mental worry were making inroads on the elder man's vitality, but, for some reason, Chesterham did not comment.

After some further talk the brothers separated, and the commissioner went to his own room. Arriving there he began to pace back and forth, and the uneasy walk was continued for some time. His head was bent, and he often made a motion as if his mind was beset with most unwelcome thoughts.

Finally he paused, sat down at the table, took up a pen and began to write. This was what he put down:

"I hereby resign my position as a member of the Board of Police Commissioners for the City of New York. In taking this step I act simply in justice to myself. I feel that my health will no longer permit me to discharge the duties of said office in a manner satisfactory to myself, and that a more robust man should have the place—"

He paused, studied the sentence, stretched out his muscular arm and then smiled bitterly.

"The old excuse; the coward's way out of it. I'll not use that document."

He tore it up, began again, and then suddenly rose and began to pace the room anew. Suddenly he stopped short.

"It won't do; I can't resign until the storm has blown over. To the dullest mind it would be a confession of guilt, and it will not do. I must stay and fight it out."

He dropped the pen and sat a long while inactive, and then rose and went to bed. If he was worried it did not interfere perceptibly with his rest. He fell asleep quickly, and the cares of the day were done with for a while.

He woke, at last, not peacefully, but with a start, and then leaped partially up in bed. Some sort of sound was echoing through the hall—a sound as if of a struggle between somebody or something, and it quickly took definite shape as he listened for a moment.

"Help! help!"

It was a cry in a woman's voice, faint and muffled, but loud enough so that Payne distinguished it perfectly. As Irena was the only woman who had sleeping quarters on that floor the commissioner drew his conclusions at once, and he sprang out of bed.

Hurrying across the floor he tore open the door and had the hall before him. No light was burning, and he could see but little, but it was enough to enable him to see a knot of human beings who were struggling across the narrow space.

He hastened on.

"What's all this?" he cried.

"Cheese it!" came in a man's voice.

"Who are you?" pursued the commissioner.

"Let this be the answer!"

One of the dark figures had separated itself from the rest, and it now hurled itself upon the commissioner. Strong hands grasped at Mr. Payne's throat, and their owner essayed to throw him to the floor. He was not to be disposed of thus, and his own strength was at once directed against the intruder.

Whoever the man was, he found he had caught all he could care for then. Payne met him with muscle as good as his own, and they swayed to and fro in a tempestuous grapple.

"Curse you!" hissed the interloper, "if I could get a weapon I would settle you!"

Payne had nothing to say, but he did his best to stop the fight where it was. He could no longer watch the progress of the contest, and he was growing nervous.

Using his eyes as best he could, he was impressed with the fact that he could not see anybody else in the hall. Where had the other people gone? Had they fled and left him to fight it out with his own opponent, or had the purpose of the attack—whatever it might be—succeeded, and he been left to play only a small part?

Spurred on he used every effort, and he felt that he was gaining the ascendancy. A little more and he would be master—but now came another sound; some one seemed to be just back of him.

He tried to turn.

He was too late.

A heavy object fell on his head, and he lost all consciousness of things around him. Oblivion had come with that telling blow.

When he woke to realization of things practical he found the glare of light in his eyes. He looked up quickly and saw himself in the arms of James, the servant, while close by stood Robertson Payne.

The commissioner leaped to his feet.

"What has happened?" he cried.

"You fainted," replied Robertson, compassionately.

"Fainted?"

"Yes."

"Nothing of the sort. Where have they gone?"

"Who?"

"The gang that was here."

"I know of no gang."

"Then whom did I fight with?"

"Fight?"

"Yes."

"Your mind is not right, Ches," replied Robertson, gently. "You have not been in any fight."

"Haven't I? Then I don't know what would be called a fight. Rob, can it be that nobody else has heard anything of this?"

"Of what?"

"Intruders in the house."

"What!" cried Robertson, with a start. "Have there been intruders here?"

"Did you ever know me to faint? That's a thing I am not in the habit of doing. I was simply knocked senseless, and left here to recover at my leisure. Possibly, no harm has been done—Hal there was the cry of a woman, now I think of it. Who called? Where is Irena?"

"Has she been in trouble—"

Thus began Robertson, but the commissioner gave him no more heed. Hurrying to the door of Irena's room, Chesterham hurriedly opened it. Light from the hall streamed in and revealed only the empty room. Irena was not there.

"Jupiter!" exclaimed the commissioner, "there is something wrong here. She is gone. Where? How? Let search be made of the house!"

Irena's father stood gazing at the empty room in something like bewilderment.

"Why," he replied, "she can't have come to harm, can she?"

"Something has happened here out of the ordinary run. There was a fight in the hall, and a woman was mixed up in it. Who should it be, if not Irena? Quick! Let search be made of the house!"

Robertson grew active.

"Yes, let it be done with all possible haste. Just Heaven! if harm has come to her it will kill me. Away!—look for her!" and the father set the example.

It did not take them long to hunt through the rooms where she was naturally to be looked for, if she was there at all, but she was not found. Then the whole house was aroused, and the search made complete. Irena was not on the premises.

The Payne brothers met again when this was certain.

"What does it mean?" asked Robertson, weakly.

"Irena has been abducted."

"By whom?"

"Just what we do not know, but must learn."

"It was done by the gang that follows Danny Fox's trail."

"I fear you are right."

"We will have satisfaction from them—"

"Let that be thought of later. Just now

we need to hunt nearer home. I will prepare to go to the police-station, and do you, James, hasten out and notify the nearest patrolman. See if he has noticed any sign of the abductors."

"I will accompany James," added Robertson Payne. "My poor Irena! But we will have her back, and then woe! to her enemies!"

CHAPTER XXV.

THE WANDERER CALLS.

It was the afternoon of the following day, and Nicholas Blackwood was in his private office. He had just returned from the Payne house, where he had been called upon to grapple with a new conundrum, and without much success as the result of his endeavors.

His most serious meditations had taken place since he was again in his own quarters.

"Puzzling!" he murmured, for the twentieth time. "Irena Payne abducted, and no clue left. Who has taken her? I am asked to believe that it was a step on the part of Danny Fox's friends, to avenge that person's death. I can't believe it. If they should undertake revenge thus, it would not be done at this stage of affairs, I am sure. There is, as they must see, still hope that the law will avenge Danny Fox. Why should they move until sure that he was not to be avenged?"

Here was the puzzle, and Nicholas gained no light by thinking about it.

"The Payne brothers tried to direct my suspicions in a certain channel," he pursued, "but it will not go. I am more inclined to believe that there was method in her disappearance. There is a possibility that the brothers are sincere, but I suspect that Irena was well aware of where she was going. Is this all a scheme to prevent the light being thrown on the previous facts? Has she disappeared because she was afraid to stay?"

There was nobody to answer the question, and he could not see into the dark web. Look where he might he found nothing but perplexity in the situation, and he did not succeed in getting the necessary clue to unravel the riddle.

He was thinking on this subject when a servant came to inform him that a gentleman wished to see him. He bade the servant show the caller up, and the latter soon came. Nicholas regarded him with considerable interest, for he proved to be out of the ordinary run of men.

"A foreigner," thought the detective, and, though he was wrong, he was excusable for the mistake.

The stranger nodded familiarly.

"You're Blackwood, I take it?" he questioned.

"That is my name."

"Mine is Cassius Rand."

"I don't think I ever heard of you, sir."

"Probably not. Still, you may not be reluctant to hear of, and from me, now."

"I shall listen with pleasure."

"What do you suppose the subject is?"

"I don't know."

Cassius Rand had been smoking a cigar. He asked permission to continue it, and then blew out a wreath of smoke with careless nonchalance.

"Subject, murder of Daniel Fox, Convict 2,009!"

"Ah! you interest me now."

"I thought I should, but I've only just begun. I can hint at more and tell less than any other man in New York."

"And that is what?"

"First, I was in the Payne house the night Danny Fox was killed; second, I saw Danny Fox; third, I happen to know that Miss Irena had a very affecting interview with Danny Fox—I saw and heard the interview, you see."

Nick needed no more in the way of preliminary to make him thoroughly attentive. He eyed his visitor keenly, and quickly responded:

"Do you mean all you say?"

"All!"

"How did you happen to see so much, if you are not one of the household—and you are not, if I have been correctly informed. More, why have you not told of this before?"

"Mr. Vidocq, I have been in the hospital since."

"Were you injured?"

"No."

"Sick?"

"Yes; and then, again, it was a paying investment with me to be there. Were you ever in the hospital with somebody else paying your expenses?"

"Never."

"Then you have missed one-half of your life. Were you ever carted off to a hospital, secretly, silently, mysteriously?"

"No."

"Then you have missed the other half. Pardon me, but can I smoke one of your cigars while we talk?"

"By all means. Help yourself! Then be so kind as to let me know what you mean by all this."

"That's just what I am here for. Listen!"

Cassius had the cigar well alight, and he smoked with infinite relish and told his story. He had decided to make all plain as far as he could, and this he proceeded to do.

"Let me begin at my birth, sir," he requested. "I am a New Yorker by extraction, though precious little I have seen of the place. My father was a sea captain, and I lived as a boy on his vessel. The beginning must have bred in me the love of a roving life, for it would be hard to name a place I have not visited since I became my own master, which I did at sixteen."

"North and South America, Europe, Asia and Africa alike know me, and Australia is a playground to me, so I am a citizen of the world in the full sense of the word. It was as such, and very nearly as a total stranger to the city of my birth, that I hove into this port a fortnight ago and became mixed up in the scenes of interest to you. I began in the drama dead-broke after a shipwreck, but I have made some money since and am on my feet."

This preliminary being over he plunged into his story and told of matters connected with the evening at Payne's house, as well as of his hospital and other subsequent experiences.

Some few things he omitted to mention. Some of them might have interested Nicholas, but he heard the most telling.

He sat in perfect silence, but Cassius Rand could see he had a rapt listener.

When he finished he blew out a cloud of smoke and prepared to hear from the detective. He did hear from him.

"Who do you think took you to the hospital?"

"My dear sir, I have no theory that is based on anything."

"How about logic?"

"Logic," replied Cassius, with a smile, "says that it must have been one of the Paynes, or somebody employed by them to do it."

"Granting that, another question rises. Why should they do it?"

"Mr. Blackwood, I believe you are the detective in the case."

"So I infer, but I want your ideas."

"It would be a man mentally blind," answered Cassius, "who did not suspect, with this evidence before him, that I was believed to know more than I have told, and that I was sent there to get rid of me. Yet, it was a mild way of disposing of a man. Did they not remember that I would soon recover?"

"It seems probable to me that they— whoever 'they' may be—took a view exactly opposed to that. You were in a serious condition. Quite likely they reasoned that you would soon die, and that the hospital was just the place for you to die silently."

"I had not thought of that."

"It is very annoying that your recollections stop where they do."

"Blackwood, if you have followed my statement closely you have noticed that I have told you what I remembered when I got my senses back. I did that designedly. Since then I have been trying to get more light. Time and again I have grappled with the subject, and the result is that things are taking form in my mind a little—"

"You remember more?" interrupted Nat, eagerly.

"I don't know whether I do or not. Do I remember, or has my persistent effort conjured up in my mind things that are purely imaginary?"

"What do you recall?"

"Well, I left Convict 2,009 in the closet, you will remember. Now, it seems to me that my mind regained activity further on, and that I had a fellow sleeper in the room. I was on the lounge, just as I was through it all, and on the floor by the window lay Danny Fox, sleeping where he could run either way at brief notice."

"Was he there by permission?"

"Just what I can't say, but it seems to me he was. My vivid imagination says he was allowed to lie there by Irena Payne, but it's all theory; I remember nothing to that effect. Yet, my more distinct new recollection, or dream, as it may be, places him there positively—"

"And then?" demanded Nick.

Cassius frowned deeply.

"Do I dream," he replied, "or did a man then enter the parlor from the hall; did he attack Danny Fox deliberately; did they fight, and was the convict killed by a blow with the cuspidor?"

Nicholas's eyes were gleaming.

"Recollection or dream?" he demanded.

"Yes, which? Recollection or dream?—fact or fancy?"

"Can't you tell?"

"I can't. It seems like recollection, but I have been trying so to remember that it may be all a fancy born of my efforts to get light."

"If true, it looks like—"

"Well?"

"A man invited to sleep with a purpose in view."

"And with the purpose carried out!" added Cassius, quickly.

CHAPTER XXVI.

STRIKE'S TRAIL.

NAPOLEON NICK did not see fit to reply to this remark. In his interest over Cassius Rand's revelations he had, he felt, been too frank with the wanderer, already, and he checked his inclination to be confidential further.

"If we accept all these theories," added Cassius, after a pause, "we arrive at the conclusion that Danny Fox was deliberately killed by the Paynes."

"Don't you remember that it is said by the newspapers that a tramp entered the house and did it all?"

Cassius shrugged his shoulders.

"We have not arrived at that decision."

"Well, Mr. Rand, I am greatly obliged to you for telling me all you have. It will help me a little, I feel sure. Where do you live?"

Cassius gave the street and number.

"Ah! I have been there," replied Nick.

"And seen Dolly Brown, as I happen to know."

"Has she told you of me?"

"Not over forty times. Dolly is a good deal torn up mentally, now," admitted Cassius.

"She resents the accusation of theft put upon her by Robertson Payne," added Nick.

"So she does, and most emphatically. She has grown active on that point, too, and sent a letter to Mr. Payne on the subject. I advised her not to, but she did it. If Payne has a guilty secret she probably scared him out of his wits."

"What was the letter?"

Cassius told of it in detail. He had seen it before it was sent, and had taken a part in the framing of it. It was by his advice that Dolly had asserted that she did not want and would not accept money from Payne. Cassius did not wish her to be arrested for blackmail.

When he had said all there was to say, he left the house and returned home. Nick was still meditating on the new revelations when he had a new caller in the shape of Strike Maginnis.

The boy entered in a state of excitement. "Say, boss, I've got somethin'" was his quick announcement.

"What?"

"You want ter keep a eye open fer Aleck Fox an' his associates."

"Why?"

"Burke Jackson has got a bee in his bunnet."

"How so?"

"Well, when you told me ter keep an eye onter Aleck an' his boon companions I jest set out ter do it. I've watched them close, fer I knew you expected somethin' from them."

Nicholas nodded. He had not expected half so much as Strike believed, and had put the boy on that track more to keep him from being too active, elsewhere, than for any other reason.

"What have you heard?" the detective asked.

"Burke has got somethin' new. He come around ter Jack Lewton's hotel, this mornin', an' he wanted fer ter see Aleck bad! Aleck wa'n't there, an' Jack didn't know where he was, but they set out ter find him. The result was that they finally got word that he would be there this evenin' at eight o'clock. Burke is goin' ter see him in Room 14."

"Why?"

"To tell his news. W'ot it is I don't know, fer Burke wouldn't tell Jack Lewton all; but he did say he had got a pointer on the Paynes, an' Aleck must know of it, right away."

Nicholas was silent. He did not know what to make of all this. Strike Maginnis was enthusiastic over it, but that did not prove that it was worth anything to Nick Blackwood.

"I would like to hear this talk, but it is impossible—"

"Not much!"

"But it's to be in doors—"

"So kin we, ef we want ter."

"How?"

"I to' you it was ter be in Room 14. Wal, I happened ter know the feller who has Room 16, right next to 14. He is a great bowler, an' many is the time I have set up the pins fer him. I've done errands fer him, too."

"But if you asked for the use of his room he would tell Jack—"

"No, he wouldn't."

"How do you know?"

"Because I've asked him, an' he said he wouldn't."

"Does that prove he will not?"

"Look here, boss, do you s'pose I'm a detective an' a slouch at the same time? Not much! I knew that though he roomed at Lewton's hotel he didn't like Jack fer a red, an' I knew, too, he was goin' ter Feladelfy ter be gone over night. Wal, I asked him, could I have his room fer my use, an' he said yes, an' he is a square man, ye see."

"Do the rooms connect?"

"That I don't know."

"If they don't, we may as well give it up. We can't listen in the hall, that is sure."

Strike was considerably disappointed that his plan was not received with more enthusiasm, but he was mollified in a measure when Nick assured him he would try to test the degree of importance attached to the matter.

They made an engagement to meet at the proper hour, and then separated. The detective did not forget the promise, and was on time at the rendezvous. He found Strike freshly excited, and delighted to see him. The boy ran forward and seized his arm.

"Cricketty jim!" cried Maginnis, "the thing is howlin', an' you are none too soon, by ginger!"

"What now?"

"They ain't goin' ter talk in the room aforesaid."

"Then we are beaten—"

"Not fer Sarah!"

"What then?"

"Somehow, Burke Jackson couldn't keep the promise, an' he has left et ter Jack Lewton, an' Jack is towin' Aleck Fox ter the place where Burke is."

"Be precise."

"Jack an' Aleck has jest started ter where Burke is."

"Where is that?"

Strike held out a paper.

"There's the street an' number as I heard them from Jack's own lips. I put them down so I wouldn't forget them. See? Now, ef we are ter be in this waltz we must get an amble on right quick, or we won't be nigh the judges' stand when the winner goes under the wire."

"Lead on!"

"Hustle where I go."

Strike did not have the longest of legs, but he well knew how to use them, and they seemed to twinkle like stars as he hastened on. He was all excitement and eagerness, a state of mind with which Nick's coolness strongly contrasted, but the Detective of Destiny had not seen as much as Strike had. Human tones and expressions tell much to an observer, and the boy had seen and heard the men they had gone to spy upon.

The building to which they were directed by the inscription on Strike's paper was ultimately sighted. It proved to be a rambling sort of a structure, old and lop sided, and they regarded it with some uncertainty.

"W'ot is it?" asked Strike.

"Seems like a factory."

"I don't see no sign o' biz."

"Can it be a tenement-house?"

"I don't see no sign o' folks either."

"Very likely it is an abandoned factory or shop. Possibly it is to be torn down, and is now unoccupied. If so, it is just the place for schemers to build plots in."

"Hush! there is Jack an' Aleck."

"Where?"

"Comin' down the street."

"What! are we here ahead of them? That is odd."

"Not when you stop ter think what a consumin' thirst them fellers have. Must have taken seven or eight beers ter get them here."

"Get out of sight."

The spies stepped into the doorway, and the Horatius athlete and Lewton came on unsuspectingly and entered the building first given notice by the watchers.

"Say, they didn't have ter ring or knock," cried Strike, eagerly.

"No."

"Then why can't we get in, too?"

"Possibly they fastened the door after them."

"We kin tell by tryin'."

Strike did not wait for permission, but hurried forward and tried the door. His sanguine hopes proved not to be well founded; the door was fastened. Like a flash he hastened to the adjacent window and tried that. It went up, and he turned an expanded face around to Nick.

"Come on!" he said, and then whisked through the window.

The detective was not sure that he approved of such tumultuous persistence, but he did not see fit to let Strike bear all the burden.

He followed; they closed the window, and were in a large, unfurnished room.

"Now hold your breath!" whispered Strike. "The fun begins!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

MYSTERY AND WILD EVENTS.

SILENCE reigned around the adventurous couple, and they would have been in darkness but for the light which struggled in from the street-lamps. Little could be seen, yet they were certain they were not yet daring any danger. It looked as if the theory that they were in a deserted factory or shop was well founded.

After a little consultation they moved to try and learn more of their predecessors. They passed out of the room and found themselves in a hall. A faint gleam of light on the floor above led them to advance in that direction.

Reaching the second floor they were not long in locating the men they sought, and, once located, they found them easy of access. The building had never been intended for privacy or security from listeners, and the spies found opportunity to look and listen. They saw Aleck, Jack and Burke—the latter partially disguised—and easily heard them talk.

Evidently, the situation had been explained to the athlete before that hour, for the discussion was well under way.

"The question is," Burke was saying, "shall we bring her out?"

"I say yes," replied the Athlete Sport.

"But Rhoe will hear of it on his return," urged Jack Lewton.

"Let him hear!" growled Burke.

"It will end secrecy, and put you in bad odor with your brother-in-law."

"Rhoe will soon get over his decent feel-

in' toward me, anyhow. You see, he has been selected to care for her, an' I reckon it was a wise selection, fer he is a good little boy, Rhoes is!" added Burke, with a sneer. "Still, he can't be sleepless, so he needs somebody ter relieve him now an' then. He chose me, ye see, though he looked dubious when he did it. Rhoes has been very, very good"—another sneer—"while I have been a gay bird, but I've tol' him I had reformed, an' he has taken up with me again on suspicion, as it were."

"Never mind you and Rhoes," interrupted Aleck. "I want the girl trotted out."

"You shall have her."

Burke rose and passed into the next room. Strike Maginnis nudged the detective.

"Sa-a-ay, I do believe we are to have a look at Miss Irena, by ginger!"

"Be still and listen."

"Sure, Mike."

Strike relapsed into muteness, but Nick's mind was busy. It looked as if he had found the abductors of Irena Payne, for why should Aleck Fox be interested in any other woman then? More, it looked as if he was about to see her, and Nick did not intend to have her go out of his sight if he once got his eyes on her.

True, there were three men opposed to him, but he had a revolver, and he was not of weak mettle.

Several minutes passed, and then the opposite door reopened. Burke walked in, and with him came— Yes, it was Irena Payne! Napoleon Nick was all attention. He had never thought to see her in such a situation, but it was only one of the strange things which had come out of this tangled up case.

The girl had not been prepared to see Aleck, it appeared, for she stopped short at sight of him and stood in a mood of agitation. He rose with an air of politeness.

"Good-evening, Miss Payne," he began.

She continued to look in silence.

"No doubt you are surprised to see me here," he continued.

"I am not!" she retorted.

"No?"

"I can easily believe you are of the kind of men who turn woman-stealers."

"What do you mean?"

"Simply that the mystery of my abduction is now explained."

"The theory makes me the stealer, does it?"

"Yes."

"That is where you fall into deep error. I had nothing to do with it. Not an atom!"

"Your presence proves that you were knowing to it—"

"It proves nothing of the sort!" cried Aleck. "I happened to learn where you were, and I came to see you. That is the sum and substance of the whole thing."

The athlete had lost his patience and temper.

"Do you still accuse me of having abducted you?"

"I do."

"Then, by Jupiter! you shall know just who did it. The name of the man is well known to you. The abductor was Robertson Payne!"

Irena's lips curled scornfully.

"Do you expect me to believe such a transparent falsehood?"

"Well, I don't know what you will believe, but I know what the truth is. Your own father was the one who stole you from your home."

"It is false!"

The sport turned to Burke.

"How is it?"

"Rob Payne was the man who did it," replied the rough. "He was just that cuckoo, an' he's the man who is footin' the bills."

"Why should he do such a thing?"

"Maybe he thought if you were out of the way the murder mystery would be safer. You know," added Aleck, "that the Payne family don't want light shed on that matter."

"You ask me to believe what is ridiculous—"

"Say," cried Burke, angrily, "did you ever hear o' one Sammy Rhoes?"

"Yes."

"He is a mysterious unseen who every day shoves things inter your prison-place

fer your use. He has long been a sort o' job worker fer your father, an' when Rob Payne thought you could well afford ter go out o' sight fer awhile, he got Sammy fer your jailer."

"That's true," added the athlete. "It was Robertson Payne who abducted you—nobody else."

Irena stood silent, looking at the floor.

"Say," whispered Strike Maginnis, "she ain't very vociferous in her denials, no more."

"Be still!" admonished Nick.

"Still? Why, you ain't heard me so much as breathe sence we got here. I shut off steam, an' don't breathe no more."

The athlete had been regarding Irena, but when he saw she was not going to make reply, he added:

"I want to be plain about this. Your father had you abducted, and put you in charge of one Sammy Rhoes. One of my friends here is a chum of Rhoes, and is in the secret, so he—my friend—told me. Am I plain, Miss Payne? Anyhow, you will see that I am not lying when I say Rob Payne was the hideous monster who stole you from your father's arms."

"Why should he do it?"

"That's it—why? Irena, don't you think it is time to treat with me? Don't you see how dead I am onto your game? Abduction? Well, I don't know how much sincerity or how much bluff there was to it, but this is sure—you were taken from your home so the murder mystery would be safer. Now, why not give up this vain battle—I have you in my power, you see—and confess who killed Danny Fox—"

"No member of my father's household did it!" declared Irena, with sudden force.

"It is false!"

"It is true!"

"Then why so much lying and mystery?"

"There is none."

"Your home is full of it."

"You do not deserve an answer."

"It will be safer to give me one."

Nicholas touched Strike Maginnis on the arm and drew him back.

"This matter," the detective then said, "has developed into a mere talking match. The assertion that Robertson Payne was Irena's abductor is remarkable enough to interest us, but now Aleck has fired his heavy guns he is sending in bird-shot. Listening will do no good. I am going in to try to rescue Irena."

"Ginger! now you talk Fifth Ward language without semmer-colons. Wade in, Nicolo Blacko, an' your aunt will hang ter yer apron-strings."

Strike had grown too figurative for practical use, but the detective did not take the trouble to ask for a bill of particulars. He drew his revolver and went back to the door.

Aleck was still driving away at his hobby, so Nick lost no time but marched into the place. The fall of his feet caused all to look around. What they saw brought the schemers to their feet.

"Keep still, all!" commanded Nick. "Let there be no violence here!"

"Say! cried Burke Jackson, "what the thunder be you doin' here?"

The detective pointed to Irena.

"I want that girl."

"You can't have her."

"We will see. I am here for that purpose, and I warn you not to resist me. I am an officer, and I will arrest whoever opposes me. Miss Payne, your place of safety is here," and he moved toward her.

"By thunder!" exclaimed Burke, "your place o' safety ain't here, Mister Police Spy!"

He drew a revolver with a quick motion, and then flourished it over his head, his face full of fight.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

WAS HE THE ABDUCTOR?

NAPOLEON NICK glanced at Aleck and Jack, and saw that they were in about the same mood as the more outspoken rough. He saw that he had got to stop the rebellion at once or he would fail in his object.

He advanced upon Burke Jackson.

"Surrender!" he commanded. "I claim you as my prisoner, and command you not to violate the law—"

Crack!

It was the sound of a revolver, and the room was plunged into darkness. Nick stood only a few feet away from Burke, but he could not see him in the least.

With the going out of the light there had been a crash of glass, and he knew that one of the party had adopted the old expedient of shooting out the light. Determined to have Burke, he pushed on and made a clutch for him.

He was successful; his hand touched Burke's garments.

"Destruction take you!" cried Burke, "take that!"

He struck out and landed with considerable force on Nick's face, but the detective was not to be baffled. He held to his man and tried to force him back.

Burke found himself in a corner, and he fought like an animal. By luck he tripped the detective, and the two fell to the floor together.

Even then Nick's hold was not broken, but he fell in such a way that he had not full use of his hands, and before he could recover a favorable position Burke had writhed away.

Nicholas leaped to his feet. Darkness was still around him, but, chagrined at the thought of losing his game, he made a rush and tried to find somebody. He succeeded. His hand closed around a human arm, and he held fast.

A new struggle was on, and his opponent fought like a tiger.

Suddenly an idea occurred to the detective. The arm in his grasp was very small for that of a man.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"That's my business," retorted a defiant voice, as the other person still struggled, "but I don't mind sayin' I am down in the futurity books as Strike Maginnis—"

Nick released his hold.

"Confound it, Strike!" he exclaimed, "don't you know your own friends?"

"Thunder an' crickets!" gasped the boy.

"A light! Get one, somehow!"

It was easily said, but not so easily executed. The only lamp of which they knew anything had been broken, and there was no sign of gas. It was not until Strike went to the lower floor that the desired light was obtained. It was then no surprise that the enemy were gone.

The detective took it for granted that they were still in the building, and there was a regular prison-room for Irena Payne there, so he took steps to find it. Armed with the lamp they went on the search.

It was long and painstaking, but no human being was found.

"By ginger! they have skipped the tra-la-la!" finally cried Strike.

"Can they be in this edifice?"

"No."

"There may be a secret room."

"Possible. Still, I reckon they have skipped the ranch."

In this emergency Strike's opinion seemed to be as good as anybody else's, and as Nick could find no sign of Irena or her enemies, he determined to take another course, and take it as quickly as possible.

He set Strike outside the building as a guard, and then secured a cab and was driven as rapidly northward as the law would permit.

When he paused it was in front of the Payne mansion. He rung the bell and was admitted. He asked for Chesterham Payne, and was told he was out, but the elder brother was in, and he came at the summons. He did not look especially amiable.

"You take a singular hour for a call," he remarked, curtly.

"Do you know why?"

"No."

"It is because I have seen your daughter."

Robertson Payne started, his eyes became enlarged, and then a red flush stole quickly over his face.

"You have seen—whom?"

"Your daughter, in the prison place where somebody has placed her."

"Nonsense, sir, nonsense!" exclaimed Robertson, in a most offensive way. "Why do you try to deceive me thus? Prison place? Who has placed her in a prison place?"

Nick had grown angry, himself.

"I am told it was you!" he retorted.

"I, sir, I?"

"So I have heard it asserted."

"I, abduct my own daughter?"

"I make no charges; I only repeat what I have heard."

Nicholas was duly prudent, but his suspicions were added to by the manner of his companion. Robertson Payne was not denying the charge with the air of an innocent man, and he was noticeably flurried.

"Why should I do that?" pursued the rich man.

"That I do not know."

"Who dares say I have done it at all?"

"You can hear the story. All I know is at your disposal, and you can deal with the matter as you see fit—you are the one most interested."

Rapidly Nick told what he saw fit to reveal. Some things he preferred to keep back, so as not to reveal too much of his case, but he told enough to make it plain to Payne that Irena had been seen.

And what did Payne have to say then? His daughter had been stolen from her home; she was now known to be in danger, but there was a possibility of her being saved. Was he worried about her? Was he eager to go to her relief?

He heard all, and this was his first reply:

"Those men lied to you, Blackwood," he asserted, with the air of one who would convince by argument.

"About what?"

"I had no hand in abducting her."

Nicholas watched the rich man keenly.

"Then your conscience is easy?"

"It is, sir; it is. Abduct my own daughter? Why, it is absurd! What motive could I have for doing it? Nonsense! What a wild yarn. No one would believe it."

Mr. Payne stood before his visitor, perfectly calm except for his desire to convince him on the one point at issue, and Nick returned his gaze wonderingly.

Where was fatherly anxiety? Why was he content to stand and argue on any subject when he ought to be hurrying to her aid?

Nick was puzzled. If he was innocent he ought to show natural affection. If he was guilty, he ought to be shrewd enough to make believe he felt such anxiety.

It was another mystery of the strange case.

Steps sounded in the hall and Commissioner Payne entered the parlor. He stopped on seeing there was a caller present, and was about to retreat, but paused at sight of the detective.

"Oh! is it you, Mr. Blackwood?"

"Yes."

"Glad to see you. Is there anything new?"

His gaze wandered rapidly from face to face as he spoke, and Nick thought he was trying eagerly to read the meaning of the interview.

Promptly the detective explained what was necessary. This time he could not complain of lack of interest. Chesterham Payne was visibly excited.

"Great heavens, Blackwood! did she really get out of your sight?"

"Yes."

"Whom did they send from Police Headquarters?"

"I have not been there?"

"Not been there? Why, you should have done it at once; you should have seen the superintendent, and got the whole force in motion, if need be."

"I thought I would come here, first."

"Wrong, wrong! A decided mistake. This was unfeeling of you, Blackwood—very poor judgment! You should— But, pardon me; I am letting my tongue run away with me. I know you did what you thought was best, and I dare say another person would have done just the same. I was quick with my tongue, but she is my niece, you know."

"Yes."

"Pardon me! Now, Blackwood, we must get at this mystery, at once. Of course, my brother had no hand in abducting poor Irena; that lie is too transparent to be considered—"

"Yes, yes!" interrupted Robertson.

"Our way is to go to Police Headquarters at once, and get all the machinery of the law

at work. Irena shall be saved if such a thing is possible. Come with me; we will get to Mulberry street without delay."

The commissioner had developed into a human cyclone, and he carried all things by storm. The elder brother was left standing in dumb uncertainty, and the other two men hurried away.

"Irena shall be found!" asserted Chesterham, as the cab whirled them away.

She was searched for as planned, but she was not found.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE CARVING-KNIFE.

THE next morning Nicholas came out for a search which proved to be as useless as it was painstaking. Commissioner Payne had secured two of the best men from Headquarters to hunt for Irena specially, but Nick had seen fit to follow a clue which had occurred to him. The attempt had been vain, and he was now homeward bound.

He was not to reach there without a new experience.

The practice of years had made the Detective of Destiny a close observer, but it was mere chance that he met with a discovery on the way.

On a certain corner he saw two men standing, and in the scarf of one blazed a diamond pin of considerable brilliancy. Nick noticed it, and chance led him to perceive one thing at the start. He paused by the side of the wearer.

"Pardon me," he said, "but may I ask you a question?"

"Of course," was the reply.

"I am an admirer of precious stones, and when I see one which just suits me, I am especially interested. May I inquire where you purchased this fine pin you wear?"

The stranger laughed good humoredly.

"I had it from my uncle," he responded.

"How was that?"

"Frankly, it was a pawnshop daisy-of-the-valley. I'm not a proud man, and though nobody else would be so frank, I'll say I got it at just the place I have mentioned. I bought it at a pawnshop because I could save money by it."

"An unredeemed pledge, eh?"

"No, it was an outright sale to the pawnbroker—or so he said. Anyhow, I bought it, as I said."

"Did you know it was stolen?"

"What?" cried the stranger.

"Unless I am very much in error, it is one of a collection of stolen jewels, and something eagerly looked for by the owner."

"The dickens!" exclaimed the possessor. "That's serious."

"You look like an honest man. Will you kindly go with me to the supposed owner, and see if he can recognize it. I am a detective."

The last statement did not add to the peace of mind of the stranger, and he required considerable more explanation before he yielded to the request. But he seemed to be an honest person, and he did not make himself disagreeable or pugnacious.

Agreeing, at last, he went with Nick and was conducted to the Payne house. It was one o'clock when they arrived, and they were informed that Mr. Robertson Payne was at lunch. When their names had been taken to him he sent word that they should come to the dining-room and he would talk with them.

Although somewhat surprised at the request, Nick proceeded to obey. Payne was eating all alone, and he seemed to be in better spirits than usual. He greeted Nick cordially.

"Glad to see you, Blackwood; glad to see you. Sit down and eat—plenty of food here—I always set a bountiful table."

"I am greatly obliged, Mr. Payne, but I must let my thanks go for all, as I am in haste. You know the jewels that were stolen from your house—"

"Yes, yes; of course," replied Payne with his mouth full.

"I have a list of the articles, you know, with a description of all—"

"Come, come, why do you meddle with such things? You are on the Fox case. You should leave all else alone; you really should, Blackwood."

"Pardon me, Mr. Payne. Do you want your diamonds back?"

"Do I? Why, of course."

"What about this pin?" and Nicholas held out the diamond which had been taken from the stranger's scarf.

"Ha! that's mine! Mine sure as fate. Why, I've worn it many a day. Glad to get it back. I'll take it—"

"One moment. We must proceed in due form. Here is a gentleman who has purchased it in good faith, and before he parts with it, he will want proof of the strongest kind. He has been victimized by a pawnbroker, and is so much out of pocket—"

"No man shall suffer through me!" declared Payne. "Stranger, tell me how much you paid for this thing, and, unless you got cheated infernally, I will pay you cash all you gave for it," asserted the rich man.

"Mr. Payne," began Nick, "I would suggest—"

"Now, you keep still, Blackwood," interrupted Payne, petulantly. "We can settle this without your help. Have a piece of cake and a drink of wine while we settle it. Kindly fall out of the discussion, though."

The detective looked hard at the host. From the start Payne had been very much unlike his usual self, and had adopted an abrupt manner and form of speech. Nick did not know how to account for it, for the old gentleman seemed to have developed into a very different sort of a man in the last few hours—

Ignoring the detective wholly, Payne began to talk with the stranger, and Nick, left with nothing to do, let his gaze wander to the table. On this article of furniture was a generous repast, and it seemed that Mr. Payne did not intend to misuse or underfeed his stomach.

It was not the food, however, which made Nicholas start abruptly.

One item of the meal was a roast of beef, and beside the big plate lay a carving knife. No sooner had Nick seen the knife than he became deeply wrapped up in the thing. He looked his fill, but did nothing more until he had seen Payne pay a sum of money to the stranger which made them mutually satisfied.

Then the detective lifted the carving-knife.

"Pardon me," he remarked, "but you have here a very shapely adjunct to your repast."

"The carving-knife? Oh! yes; that's a bit of good steel," answered Payne.

"I see you have your initials on the handle."

"Yes, it's marked 'R. P.' All my property that can be thus marked has the initials on it. See? 'R. P.' Nobody could steal that knife."

"It is peculiar in some ways. I'll wager something it would be hard to find another like it."

"I don't know," returned Payne, yawning. "I bought a pair of them, just alike, and had both marked thus, and they are still in use. Possibly they are a bit worn, but just as good as new."

"Will you allow me to see the second one?"

"I suppose I can call a servant, if it is of such special interest to you, and have the knife brought— Nonsense! why should I? A knife is a knife, isn't it? The other is just like this. Pshaw, Blackwood; don't be so foolish. No, my dear man, I can't send for the other one. Well, gentlemen, my lunch must go on. Will you sit up and eat with me? Lunch must be attended to, you know."

It was not only a direct refusal to exhibit the knife, but a more or less polite dismissal, and Nicholas did not fail to take the hint. He said a few parting words, and then conducted his fellow caller out of the house.

The stranger was of no further use to the detective, so he was dismissed.

Nicholas lost no time, however, in getting to the pawnshop where the pin had been purchased. The average pawnbroker works hand in hand with detectives, and it was no exception now.

The disciple of the three golden balls gave his aid freely, and examination showed that the pin was not the only article stolen from Payne's house that had brought up there.

By comparing Nick's list of what had been stolen it was found that besides the pin, three rings had been pawned, and one sold out—

right. It was a trifle puzzling when the pawnbroker announced that each of the rings had been pawned under a different name.

"How did the men look who pawned them?" asked Nick.

"I do not remember that in the least."

"Let me see the names."

"Here they are."

The detective read them in order, but without getting any light until he came to the last of the number. That was enough to make him instantly attentive.

"Cassius Rand!" he murmured.

"Yes."

"This was the latest deposit of all."

"Yes. It's an assumed name, of course; it don't sound natural."

Nick did not know about that, but one thing was sure. The address which accompanied the name was the same that Cassius Rand had given to him.

He sat staring at the name with many contradictory feelings. Had Cassius Rand really pawned things stolen from Payne's? If so, could he have come by them by means other than dishonest? Had Cassius all the while been deceiving him?

"Three times the thief has been here," added the pawnbroker, touching Rand's name with his finger. "He will come again; then I will send for a policeman and have him arrested."

"We will see."

Nick rose suddenly. He did not like to see suspicion rest upon Cassius Rand. It was not that he had such an interest in the young man, but he had marked him down as honest, and this was a new upheaval of his theories.

Leaving the pawn-shop, Nick walked home. Once in his own room he took from a secret place a carving-knife, long and ugly of look. He scanned it closely, and then murmured:

"Beyond doubt, the mate of the knife I have just seen on Payne's table. And this is the knife with which the unknown tried to kill me!"

CHAPTER XXX.

THE STOLEN JEWELS.

It had been no idle curiosity which led Napoleon Nick to look at the carving-knife on Payne's table. As soon as he saw the thing there he had noticed the resemblance it bore to the knife in his possession. He had examined it, fixed its points firmly in his mind and returned to his own room to make comparisons.

Now, he knew he had made no mistake; the knives were mates.

Each had the same peculiarities of handle and blade; each had the same mark, made in the same way—the letters, "R. P."

"Payne claimed to have a mate to his carving-knife, but would not let me see it," pursued Nick. "Well, perhaps he couldn't do so—here is the mate. And how did I get it? I have not forgotten that the assassin entered yonder window, crept upon me when I was asleep and tried to drive this blade to my heart. 'R. P.' Humph! this does not look well."

No disinterested person could have disputed his assertion, and to many it would have been proof absolute. The silent witness had been devoted to the task of taking Nick's life, and had failed only by a small chance.

Long he sat there with the weapon in his hand, but he finally rose and returned it to its hiding-place. This done, he left the house again and went to make a call.

He brought up in the presence of Cassius Rand, and was cordially received.

"I was wanting something to break up the monotony of my life," remarked the adventurer. "You are welcome."

"Life is monotonous with you, is it?"

"Yes."

"Idle young men usually occupy time by painting the town red."

"Paint requires money."

"Pawn another ring," swiftly returned Nick.

His gaze was on Cassius's face, but the adventurer did not waver. Instead, he smiled lazily.

"I had forgotten that I told you of that."

"Do you remember it now?"

"No, I don't, but it don't matter. Life is too short to worry about anything."

"I think you told me the ring was a family heirloom."

"Do you? Well, my memory is not the only weak sister, if you recall the case that way. The ring was one I found in the street."

"Where did you pawn it?"

Cassius promptly gave the place where Nick had found the ring, and the detective's last suspicion vanished. There was candor in the words of his companion, and honesty in his tone and expression.

"If you found this, Rand," pursued the detective, "I am curious to know more about it. You only referred to it casually—"

"Blackwood, I don't remember referring to it at all, and I don't believe I did, but you are welcome to the whole story. Here goes."

Frankly and clearly Cassius explained how he had found the ring in the loose earth by the break in the line of houses near Payne's—the same break through which he had passed the night of Danny Fox's murder.

The detective listened closely, saying nothing until the end. As Cassius had given none of the adjuncts, but simply stated that he happened to be walking near there, that night, the story was short.

"Quite a find for you," commented Nick.

"Yes."

"To how many have you mentioned the matter?"

"Nobody."

"Then you, alone, know of the fact that you found it?"

"That's all."

"I desire you—"

"Wait!"

"What now?"

"I should add," pursued Cassius, laughing, "that nobody knows of it but Payne's servant girl."

"What?"

Cassius repeated the words.

"What does she know about it?"

"She happened along just as I had picked it up and was surveying it critically."

"So you know her? Which girl is it?"

"I don't know her; I don't know which. I see this puzzles you, so let me explain. I should not have recognized her at that moment if I had not seen her before. You see, she was over in the Park with her best fellow, and she did some weeping there which had attracted my attention, so I knew her when she appeared to me on the avenue, later."

"I do not understand all this. Will you kindly explain in detail?"

Cassius told of his journey toward Payne's, actuated by curiosity: of his walk along the side of Central Park; of the weeping woman and the couple just inside the Park; of the chance which made him see more of her without design on his part, and of her entrance to Payne's house.

"Describe her!" shortly directed Nick.

Cassius obeyed fully.

Nicholas heard with outward apathy, but inward interest. The description fitted Mary Moss to the letter.

"I take it," concluded Cassius, "that it was only a servant's quarrel with her lover."

The detective did not reply, but he remembered that Mary Moss had seemed a good deal worried by recent events. Nick's silence gave an idea to Rand's quick mind.

"Possibly, though, the girl is troubled mentally," he added. "If the Paynes killed Danny Fox, and she knows it, she may be woman enough to feel it keenly, and be afraid they would be found out. The shadow of the crime may be over her."

"Do you think so?"

"Yes. Then, again," pursued Cassius, "there is the matter of that robbery at Payne's. When it was found out Mary Moss designedly led the family to think it was Dolly Brown who did it. Now, if this young woman I saw was Mary, as I think it was, who knows but she may be all wrought up over the robbery, and afraid she will be accused of it?"

"All such things," quietly replied Nick, "have room for many speculations. All detective cases are full of them."

"Anyhow, I advise you to keep an eye on Mary Moss," supplemented Cassius, after a thoughtful pause.

"Let us not be hasty in accusing Mary," answered Nicholas. "She accused Dolly Brown, and we know, or believe, it was wrongfully done—"

"We know it!" exclaimed Cassius.

"Very well; we know it, then, if you wish. But what proof have we that this robbery was not all a farce—a scheme on the part of the Payne family to lead us astray?"

"Well, maybe so."

"All we can do is to take time to unravel it, and this I think we can do."

"Don't you find the evidence bewildering and contradictory?"

Blackwood smiled.

"Frankly, I never had such a jumble in my life. Of all those who are, one would say, my natural helpers, not one is to be relied upon."

"And some have deliberately lied."

"Yes, but they may be all right."

"You don't think so, though. Well, Blackwood, I am only a passenger, so to speak, and I won't urge you to give me undue confidence, but if you need aid at any time, you know where to find a willing novice—that's me."

Nick extended his thanks and went his way.

His next step was to try and look up the two other men who had pawned Payne jewelry, or the man who had given two names, as it might be; and he tried the other two addresses. Nothing came of it; the men, or man, was not known there, and it was plain that the pawner did not intend to leave any sign.

It was two hours later that Nick's work took him close to the Payne house, and he saw Robertson going out for a drive. The circumstance gave the detective an idea. He felt sure that, at that hour, Commissioner Payne would not be at home. This would leave the house with no one but the servants.

He hesitated, meditated, and ended by turning back toward the residence which was then of such interest to him.

He rung the bell, and it was soon answered. He saw Mary Moss, herself, within. Her face changed quickly at sight of him, and he believed her expression was one of fear, but he was very cool about it. He smiled reassuringly.

"Family in, Mary?" he asked.

"No, sir."

"Sorry! I will step in and wait a moment. Is this the parlor? Oh! yes, I ought to have known. Wait a bit, Mary. How about the jewelry which was stolen from here?"

Mary was by the door. She looked pale and weak, and she now clung to the door-knob, as if for support.

"What do you mean, sir?" she faintly inquired.

"Has it been recovered?"

"I—I don't know, sir."

"It was singular about that theft, wasn't it, Mary?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Try to know, then. It is a painful state of affairs when a person gets so she don't know. I want to talk with you about this theft, and we may be able to get light on it. What do you know about it?"

CHAPTER XXXI.

STRIKE LEADS THE WAY.

IN Napoleon Nick's manner there was an insinuating kindness, mingled with a touch of irony, and this or the subject had considerable weight with Mary Moss. She seemed to grow more and more uncomfortable.

"I think, sir," she replied, "that you had better ask this of Mr. Payne."

"Why not of you?" returned the detective.

"I—I don't know, sir," she faltered.

"You have no motive for hiding the truth, have you?"

"Oh! no, sir."

"Then, of course, you will not hesitate to talk. Now, about this robbery. You accused Dolly Brown—"

"Oh! no, sir; I only pointed out to Mr. Payne that she was around then."

"You were around, too."

"Yes, but I did not take the jewels, and I don't think Miss Brown did. She is like an honest woman, sir."

"Who else could have taken the jewels?"

"I don't know, sir."

"You seem to keep 'I don't know, sir,' in stock for immediate use. If the servants didn't steal these things, could the friend of one of them have done it?"

"I don't think so," promptly replied Mary.

"You had no friend here?"

"No, sir."

"Do you ever have callers here?"

"Not very often, sir."

"But you do occasionally, it seems. Who are they?"

"Katie Greene and Maggie Conness."

"No men?"

"No, sir; I never have men call to see me. I don't care for men, Mr. Blackwood."

"Lucky girl! Well, since no visitor is to be included, what about the robbery being all a gigantic sham? Isn't it possible it was done as a blind?—done to hoodwink somebody?—to throw suspicion in the wrong direction?"

Mary was silent for a moment, and then her face suddenly brightened and she replied:

"That looks reasonable, sir; yes, sir, it wouldn't surprise me if that was it."

Mary was manifestly much relieved, and there was nothing to worry her during the rest of Blackwood's stay. He talked on with great friendliness of manner, and seemed to have no object but to kill time. He finally looked at his watch and announced that he could not delay any longer, and then took his departure.

Near the corner he came upon James, the man-servant, and he stopped and talked with him for perhaps fifteen minutes. Various things were spoken of, including the murder and the weather but Nick was subdued and quiet, and nothing told of undue interest in the conversation. When they separated James murmured:

"A polite and nice gentleman, he is. He knows how to be a gentleman, he does. Talked just as sociable as if he had met Mr. Payne. That's what I call a model man. He was interested in my private affairs, too, and in those of the other servants. Takes an interest in common folks, he does!"

And then James went home feeling happy of mind.

Nick returned to his own quarters, and found visitors waiting for him. One was Strike Maginnis, and the other was, or seemed to be, a boy of Strike's own age. He was like the ex-pride of the bowling-alley, too, in that his clothes were not whole, and his face and hands liberally sprinkled with dirt.

Nick thought there was something familiar with his face, but could not remember where he had seen him.

"Mister," explained Strike, "this is Mosey Higgles."

"A friend of yours?"

"Wal, yes, sorter," replied Strike, with a laugh.

"I have seen him before."

"Where?"

"I don't know; I can't recall his face. It is familiar, however. Where have we met, boy?"

Mosey broke into a loud laugh in which Strike joined.

"I guess my disguise will do," remarked Mosey, "if even you can't tell a girl from a boy."

Nicholas looked hard, and then light broke upon him.

"Dolly Brown!" he exclaimed.

"Nobody else," replied that young lady.

"What in the world does this masquerade mean?"

"Et means," replied Strike, "that you an' me an' Mosey Higgles is goin' out ter rescue Irena Payne, this eve."

"What?"

"Mosey has got his eagle eye onter the raffle, an' we have only ter wade in an' win the purse."

"Now, you keep quiet," commanded Mosey. "We haven't got much time to lose, and it mustn't be wasted by roundabout talk. The short of it is, Mr. Blackwood, we think Irena is at the club-house of the Horatius Athletic Club."

"Why do you think so?"

"Well, I have a friend who visits there often, being in with the members. He was there last night, and in poking around the outskirts of the rambling building he thought he got evidence that there was some girl shut up there, and he heard a man behind cover call her by a name he understood as Irena. He is a man of peace, and he didn't intend to make any racket, but when he dropped in to see me, and told me about it, I just said it must be looked into, so, I disguised myself as you see—"

"Yes," cried Strike, "an' now you an' me an' Mosey is goin' ter look inter it."

This disjointed explanation did not satisfy Nick, and he asked more questions, getting an account more full and clear. He was then made acquainted with the plan of his would-be allies.

"You are to disguise yourself—"

"Yes, and then we all go to the club-house—"

"Payin' our way in to see the boxin'-match—"

"Then watch our chance to slip in behind the scenes, as it were, and so look for rena."

"We kin do it easy."

Strike and Dolly flung these explanations at Nick in a volley, but he remained cool and proceeded to object strongly to the company of Miss Dolly Brown, not believing it a proper way for her to attend the exhibition, or a safe place for her if they were going on the war-path.

Here he met with opposition. Dolly declared she was going, anyhow, and then the volatile young woman pranced around the room to show how well she could take off the character of a boy.

Men can extinguish a fire, but not a cyclone. Dolly was not a cyclone, but she proved to be as hard to deal with. She was a modest and well-behaved girl, but she had been irritated by the charge of dishonesty against her, and was bound to make an active war on all sides to clear her reputation. If Irena was rescued, she argued, and she had part in it, she would establish her reputation with Irena, if not with the male Paynes.

All of Nick's arguments having failed, he gave in and accepted the inevitable. Donning a disguise, himself, he left the house with his ill-assorted companions.

They were none too soon, for people were already going in to see the athletic club's show, so the three adventurers purchased tickets and joined the throng.

Taking seats at the rear of the hall they read the programmes, Nick and Dolly assuming interest, and Strike feeling it fully.

"Great bill!" declared the young admirer of the manly games. "You will see some fun this eve. Slumpy Bob has a set-to with Mike Scissors, an' Digger Dane an' Swede Tom make a go at wrestling. Digger Dane is a cuckoo; he is. Wrestled Evan Lewis, once, an' almost throwed him, too. Them Tomkins Brothers is great at gymnastics—Hullo! wot is this?"

Strike's finger rested on the programme further down the page, and his face was puzzled.

"'The Sleepin' Statue Brought to Life,'" he read. "Say, wot is that act?"

"I've heard of such things before," answered Dolly.

"Wal, so have I, but it's kinder a new wrinkle, seems ter me, fer the Horatius Athletes ter take et up."

Further speculation was stopped by the beginning of the entertainment, and Slumpy Bob and Mike Scissors were soon hammering each other around the stage with gloves none too light of weight.

When the next event was well under way, Dolly whispered to Nick:

"Ain't it time for us to move?"

"Not yet."

"But time is passing."

"There are two men at the rear of the place, standing up, that I don't want should know me. My disguise is good, but I might be recognized by them."

The detective did not see fit to explain, but he alluded to Aleck Fox and Jack Lewton. Both were on hand and taking the events in with the zeal of men to whom such things appeal.

Nicholas did not feel wholly at ease.

Their work was a good deal of the blind man's buff order, and the enemy seemed to be all there.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE SLEEPING STATUE.

SEVERAL events had been given, and all greeted with rapturous applause by the Horatius Athletes and their friends, and then Strike Maginnis, one of the most rapt watchers, stirred from deep abstraction as Slim Peters finished off Tim Warren in a set-to.

"Say, I," the boy exclaimed, "the Sleepin' Statue biz is next, an' we will see wot fer a thing it is. Look sharp—"

"Hus-sh-sh!"

The request ran through the house as the stage manager appeared before the act-drop.

"Ladies and gentlemen," spoke the august official, "we will now have the pleasure of witnessing the Sleeping Statue, a piece brought here right from Paris, and with a Parisian girl, Mademoiselle Fifi Tournure, as the star. Other characters are Walter Raine, a student, and Muggs Sloane, a tramp who carries his baggage. I ask you to witness our masterpiece, and I hope it will be liked."

He disappeared, and the curtain went up.

The stage had been set with some elaboration, and there was a wide stretch of outdoor scenery of green, with one white object in the center. On a rock reclined a female form, and all eyes became fixed upon it. This was not singular, for it was striking in the extreme.

To carry out the notion of a statue, the female was clothed in unbroken white, and as her face had been brought down to the same color, the illusion was perfect.

Like a statue she did, indeed, seem then.

Her head reclined on an elevated point of rock, and she seemed asleep. A murmur ran through the hall.

"How beautiful!" was the cry from more than one pair of lips.

"Ginger!" muttered Strike Maginnis.

"Looks as if she was dead!" added Dolly.

Nicholas Blackwood had long since outgrown his passion for theatrical things, but he was as mute and attentive then as anybody else. He was looking at the supposed sleeper with wide-open eyes. If others made comments he did not—he looked and said nothing.

There was a rustle at the wings, and then two men appeared. It was necessary to introduce them as the student and the tramp, for each was perfect in his make-up.

Suddenly Strike Maginnis rose to his feet.

"Ginger!" he again exclaimed.

Nick abruptly pulled him back.

"Be still!" almost hissed the detective.

"But, say, that tramp is Burke Jackson!" gasped Strike.

"Be still, I tell you!"

The detective pinched Strike's arm until the boy almost cried out with pain, but even this did not take the latter's gaze off from the tramp of the play. He was sure he was looking at Burke, and it amazed him a good deal.

The tramp and the student began to speak their lines, but only a few words had been said when Nick turned to Strike again.

"The girl!—the sleeping woman!" he whispered. "Who is she?"

Again the boy shifted his gaze, and then he again rose to his feet, his mouth falling open like a new Mammoth Cave. Nick seized him and pulled him to the seat again.

"Wh-wh-what?" stammered Strike, unable to find more coherent form of speech.

"Be still!" cautioned the detective.

"But, say, that sleepin' gal is Irena Payne!"

"So it is!"

And so it was! Nicholas was not blind—on the contrary he was quick to detect a resemblance in anybody—and he knew he was not in error now, but the surprise was almost overwhelming. The Sleeping Statue was personified by Irena Payne.

Amazing fact!

Accustomed as he was to controlling himself in all emergencies, Nick was helplessly bewildered now. It was supposed that the girl was a prisoner, carefully kept from public view by bolts and bars, yet here she was in the most public of places, with a large audience looking at her. True, she had

never been of their rank in life, but it was a strange and startling turn of affairs.

"Say," added Strike, when he could recover his breath, "be we all dreamin'?"

"No."

"Why should she be there?"

"I don't know."

"Has she gone on the stage?"

"You see her there."

"But why should she do it? Great Scott! an' all the rest o' the family, what does it mean?"

Nicholas did not answer. He could not answer. Many a mystery had he dealt with in his career, but this one was so opposed to what seemed common sense on the part of the abductors that he could scarcely believe his own sight.

The abducted girl on the public stage, with attention boldly invited to her when secrecy seemed so essential for the abductors!

No wonder Nick was astounded.

The event was going on. The student and the servant had their speeches to make, and, at last, the moment came when the statue was to be wakened to life. All of the audience leaned forward, and nobody else was more rapt than Strike, Dolly and the detective. What would the statue do?

Irena, subjected to the requirements of the play, woke, moved, stood erect.

Then came remarks for the student and the tramp to make as a prelude to her own speeches, probably. They did their work, and Burke Jackson was glib of tongue, but Nick noticed that he watched Irena keenly—anxiously, it seemed.

Then the statue spoke. Words fell from Irena's lips—faint, low and machine-like—words hardly distinguishable, and such as a sleeper or sleep-walker might use, both as to utterance and other things.

"She takes it cool," remarked Dolly.

The detective started.

"The girl is not herself!" he exclaimed. "Unless I err greatly she don't know what she is doing. Upon my soul, I believe she is drugged!"

"Say," added Strike, "Aleck has got his peepers open."

The detective looked back. Aleck had come half way down the aisle and was staring fixedly. Burke was so disguised that, from where he was, the athlete did not recognize him, but he did find a strange familiarity in Irena. To him she looked like Irena, but he could not believe that it was so.

Only a casual glance did Nick give the athlete. He returned to the scene on the stage, and he was so impressed with his theory that Irena was drugged that he could no longer sit inactive and let matters go as they would. Irena was near, and he determined to lose no time in rescuing her.

Rising, he walked deliberately down the aisle to the stage. In this there was nothing to call for unusual notice, but it was a genuine surprise to all when he laid his hand on the rail by the musicians and vaulted to the stage.

The play stopped short, and actors and audience alike looked in wonder to see this unlooked for innovation. Burke stopped short and looked in as much amazement as anybody else, for Nick's disguise was good enough to deceive even the rough.

The detective caught Irena's hand.

"It is time for this infamy to stop!" he exclaimed, in a voice audible to all there.

Only one person seemed quick enough of wit and action to answer him. This was the student, who came into the scene with prompt attention.

"What in perdition do you mean, sir?" he demanded, belligerently.

Irena was passive in Nick's grasp, and he led her closer to the footlights and again addressed the audience:

"Gentlemen," he cried, "I want the co-operation of all honest persons here. An infamous wrong is being done. This young woman has been stolen from her home, and I claim that she is now under the influence of a drug, and not really capable of knowing what she is doing. I am a detective, and I now take possession of her, and I ask you—"

Crash!

The curtain dropped, and Nick was not only shut off from the audience, but almost total darkness fell around him. He could

see hardly anything but the girl in his grasp, and with the instinct of a wide-awake man he turned with the thought that danger might lurk behind him.

Too late! He received a blow which sent him reeling away from Irena, and then other blows followed. He was felled to the floor, and dizziness and semi-unconsciousness came over him.

He nearly lost all track of the things of life, and it seemed that he had squirmed about on the floor a long while when light came once more and he was lifted on somebody's knee.

"My pard is dead!" cried the somebody, whose voice was remarkably like that of Strike Maginnis.

"He's all right," replied another person, "but what in thunder does all this mean?"

Nick struggled to his feet.

"Where are they?" he gasped.

"Gone!" lugubriously answered Strike.

"We have searched all around, but Burke Jackson has done his work well an' skipped fer keeps. Yes, he's gone, an' he has took Irena with him—drat the luck!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

AN UNEXPECTED EVENT.

NAPOLEON NICK was full of momentary indignation.

"Why was not their escape prevented?" he demanded, hotly.

"Wal, by ginger!" exclaimed Strike, "I hustled fer keeps, but it wasn't no use. Burke must 'a' been prepared fer et, an' he got her away right speedy."

The detective turned on one of the men near him.

"Do you represent this club?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then I demand an explanation—"

"It is easily given, sir, and this club is blameless. We hired the girl and her two companions for this feature just as we hire all other performers, except those who are regular members of the club. This boy, here, has told me that the girl is an abducted girl, and that he thinks the so-called tramp was her chief jailer. Of that we know nothing; the bargain was made by the third man, the student, and we did our part in good faith. We did not for a moment dream that there was anything wrong."

Nick was calm enough to see that this statement was made in good faith.

"Why didn't you seek to prevent the escape of the trio?"

"We were all dumfounded by the course of events, and when we regained our wits they were gone. They went by the stage entrance, so they had clear passage."

"Fact, by ginger!" agreed Strike.

"Has anything been done to capture them?"

"I tried my luck with the copper on the beat," answered Strike, "but he had not seen them."

"From what address did they do business with you?" asked Nick, again addressing the manager.

"We didn't have their address. The man they called their manager came here to see us."

The detective remembered something else. "It has been said that you had a woman imprisoned here, sir."

"An outright lie, Mr. Blackwood. I have heard of this from your two boys, but I deny it fully. We have girls who come here and rehearse for events, and are about the building as all members are, but nobody has been held prisoner here, nor could they be without my knowing it. It has not been done."

The speaker held to that assertion then, and he held to it ever after, and there never was proof gained that he had spoken falsely. So Nick was led to believe, singular as he thought it, that the evidence which brought them there was purely imaginary, and the work of chance.

All of the officers of the club joined in declaring that they knew no more than had been told, and that ended it for the time. Aleck Fox and Jack Lewton had disappeared, and, on the whole, Nick thought his best way was to waste no more time there.

Accompanied by Strike and Dolly, he went outside, and the rest of the night was put in by hunting where their judgment suggested. Irena was not found.

In the early hours of the morning the detective secured a little rest, and then he was ready for business. He had reported to Police Headquarters the circumstances under which Irena had been seen, but he now intended to see Commissioner Payne, to relate to him in full the remarkable turn of events.

He went to the Payne house, and was ushered into the parlor. His request for an audience was taken to the commissioner, though he sent no name, and then he waited. He soon heard steps on the stairs, and caught a glimpse of Chesterham Payne as he descended. At that moment the street-door bell rung, and the commissioner, himself, opened the door.

Instantly the detective heard a glad, surprised cry.

"Irena!"

Nicholas leaped to his feet.

"Uncle!" responded a feminine voice.

Nick stood amazed. Through the hall doorway he caught sight of Irena, but she was not alone—her companion was Burke Jackson, no longer disguised as he had been at Rhoe's house, or as he was in the Horatius Club-house, but in his own true form. And Burke had never been more at ease and amiable, it seemed. He smiled broadly.

"Commissioner," he replied, "let me congratulate you on the recovery of your daughter. She's back, an' as safe as peach pie. More, ask her who did it—who rescued her—an' she will tell you it was me—yes, sirree, me!"

"Wonders will never cease!" thought Nick.

Chesterham Payne had caught his niece in his arms.

"Child, child!" he murmured, "this is a most joyful meeting. It gives me new life to see you once more, and it will remove a heavy load from your father's mind."

Burke grinned broadly.

"That's so, fer keeps!" he coincided.

"I am weak and ill," spoke Irena. "Let us go where I can rest."

She started for the back-parlor, and the commissioner and Burke followed her. Nicholas Blackwood did not scruple to go to the connecting doors and proceed to hear and see all he could. Irena threw herself into an easy-chair.

"My dear child!" cried the commissioner, "where have you been all this while?"

"I was stolen from my home, and I have since been held captive under the influence of drugs."

"I was the one who rescued her," added Burke, pushing his claims without too much of modesty. "I seen her by mere luck, and I knew by her looks she was in trouble, so I took her away. You see, boss," to Payne, "she was shut up in an old house. I went there to collect a bill due me, an' when I seen her I just took her out. I was not detected, an' there was no fight—small matter, very small matter."

"If it is as you say, it is anything but a small matter!" declared Payne. "She is all in all to me, and he who helps her does more than to help me. Further, I am ready to help him who helps her."

"Is that so, boss?" replied Burke, eagerness showing through all the lines of his crafty face. "Well, I can't talk it over much with you, fer I must leave New York in a few hours, if I can raise money enough. I have a sick sister in Cohoes, an' I must go there speedy. First, I will see a friend o' mine an' see ef I kin borrow cash enough ter pay my fare. See?"

Burke made a movement as if to go.

"Do you say you want to go to a sick sister?" demanded Payne.

"Yes."

"And that money is lacking?"

"That's jest it, boss. I am poor as a church mouse, fer I have ter care fer a widdered mother an' two invalid sisiters, an' I never have accumulated much cash, ye see. That's why I have ter borrow—"

Payne pulled out his pocketbook.

"You will not need to borrow," he asserted. "I will gladly pay all your expenses and more. I have here only a small sum of money, but I will give you my check for—"

"Can't stop fer checks," hastily announced Burke. "Wo't is needed is cash, ye see."

"Well, here is something like one hundred dollars—"

"Jest w'ot I need."

"But it does not pay you for rescuing Irena—"

"Never mind, boss; mebbe we kin arrange et later on, so you kin send it to me, but w'ot I need now is—is w'ot I kin get. Jest hand over the hundred, an' all will be rosy."

Burke had his gaze fixed on the money, and his eyes fairly glowed with cupidity. His fingers itched to get hold of the green-backed slips of paper.

Nicholas Blackwood stood inactive, but he was wondering if Payne would be foolish enough to pay money to the scoundrel who, plainly, was now working some new game. Nick had parted with the disguise he had worn at the club-house, and there were reasons why he did not wish to reveal himself to Burke Jackson.

Mr. Payne seemed to be full of genuine gratitude, and he was about to hand over the roll of bills when Irena, who had been watching all, abruptly came into the conversation.

"Stop!" she exclaimed.

"What do you mean, Irena?" asked Payne.

"Do not give him a dollar!" cried the girl.

"But he has brought you home—"

"So I have," added Burke, in an aggrieved tone. "Saved ye from yer enemies, and brought ye right ter yer unc. Ain't that nothing?"

"Sir," pursued Irena, forcibly, "I have not been so much deceived in this matter as you think. I know you!"

"Know me? Wal, I s'posed you did."

"You do not know how much I am aware of, sir. You have figured of late a good deal in disguise, but when you came to me in your real character, as a rescuer, I knew you at once."

Burke quailed noticeably,

"I ain't done nothin' ter be scolded fer," he persisted.

"No? How about aiding Rhoe to hold me captive? How about putting me on the stage?"

"I don't know a thing you're talkin' about, gal."

"You writhe under the lash in vain; you may as well stand up and meet it. I have been drugged and helpless, but you had to free me from the stuff when you took me away now. I had been sane enough before that so you did not deceive me. Your trick will not work!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

BURKE HAS AN UNHAPPY HOUR.

THE detective was greatly pleased to find Irena so well able to take care of her interests. He did not want to reveal himself, and the need of doing so seemed to grow less perceptible. As a result, he remained passive, and listened to what followed.

Burke Jackson was clearly much disconcerted by the turn of events, but he tried to maintain his point.

"This 'ere is a gross libel," he asserted, complainingly. "I ain't never done nothin' o' the sort."

"Irena, make yourself plain," directed Commissioner Payne.

"I will. I was abducted and held prisoner by a man named Rhoe, and he had an assistant this man—"

"Not much, he didn't!" declared Burke.

"I was moved to different places, but the two men were always my jailers. This one wore a disguise. To keep me quiet and harmless I was drugged, too. While in this condition they asked me to appear on the stage, somewhere, I know not where; and I did it. I was so under the influence of the stuff then that I know but little of what happened, but I remember there was a row of some sort. Then I was hurried away and taken to my prison-place, but this man quickly appeared and assumed the role of rescuer. He pretended to be much afraid he would be prevented from rescuing me, but there was good reason why he was not prevented."

"Oh, oh!" muttered Burke.

"His plot seemed to be going well, but I knew him from the first, if he had cast off his disguise. I appeared to be unsuspecting, however, and came very gladly when he conducted me here. Uncle, do not give him a cent. The hider can find, and he brought me back simply to get money for it."

Chesterham Payne's face had grown dark and frowning.

"Is this true, sir?" he demanded.

"Not by a blamed sight!" declared Burke.

"You will have to prove—"

"Et was a genuine rescue done in good faith, an' with a desire ter help the gal. Ef you set down on me you will do wrong to an honest man."

"You assert that you were not one of her captors, do you?"

"I do, fer keeps."

"Irena, may you not have made a mistake?"

"No, uncle."

"But this man is an entire stranger to you—"

"He is not."

"No?"

"I remember him well."

"When have you seen him?"

"With Mary Moss."

Burke started perceptibly.

"With Mary?" repeated Payne. "That is impossible."

"So et is!" declared Burke. "I don't know who this Mary is, but I don't know her, an' I never did."

"I say you were her friend," replied Irena, quickly. "I believe you were her lover, but she was not proud enough of you to bring you to the house."

The tough man seemed pretty well dismayed and frightened.

"Say, now!" he protested, unsteadily. "this ain't right. I rescued you fair an' true, an' now you say things against me that ain't so. This Mary Moss I never heerd of, nohow. Who is she? I don't know her, an' that is straight. Mr. Payne, you won't believe ill of a poor, hard-workin' feller who has brought yer relation home, will ye?"

"Irena," asked the commissioner, "where have you seen Mary with this man?"

"On the streets. She never brought him here, to my knowledge."

"I never see or heerd o' this Mary!" declared Burke, stubbornly.

"We will see."

Payne touched the bell.

"W'ot ye goin' ter do?" asked Burke.

"Summon Mary. If you are telling the truth you shall have the money promised you. If my niece has made a mistake she has done it innocently, but no wrong shall come out of it."

"I ain't goin' ter be investigated," grumbled the rough, with a step toward the door.

"If innocent, I want you to have this money. Don't you want it?"

Payne exhibited the roll of bills. Burke gazed at it for a moment, and then a most decided look appeared on his face.

"Let the circus go on!" he growled.

This point was but just settled when Mary Moss, herself, appeared in answer to the bell. She came without any idea of what was before her, nor did she have any warning until Commissioner Payne had stepped back and bade her enter. When she crossed the threshold and saw Burke she stopped short, however, and it was clear that the sight was not an agreeable one.

She was frightened—eyes, color and expression proved that.

She stared at the visitor as if he had been a ghost.

Burke Jackson seemed eager for vindication, and, looking sharply at Mary, he began to speak immediately.

"So this is the gal, is it?" he demanded.

"Wal, I want ter say that I don't know her—don't know nothin' about her at all. Never seen her before; total stranger ter me, she is. Ef she is inclined ter do the right thing, she will say the same. How is it, gal? Now, Mr. Payne, notice w'ot she says. The question is, did she ever see me before? Ef she has it will bring her an' me inter a pretty mess, but ef she never did, all will be well. I want her speak out, truthfully. Of course, this is a trivial affair, but I want vindication, I do. Mr. Payne, I'll bet she clears me quick. Did she ever see me before, is the question. Well, let her say; I won't open my mouth ter influence the business, at all."

Nicholas Blackwood smiled.

"Wily Burke!" he murmured. "He has not only skillfully given the servant her cue,

but his long speech has given her chance to recover in a measure from her fright."

Mary had been given the chance, but she did not seem to profit by it, as yet. She was pale, and she gazed fearfully at the trio before her.

Payne had looked annoyed as Burke rattled on so volubly, but he had chance to speak, at last. He improved it.

"Mary," he spoke, "do you know this gentleman?"

"There, there!" interrupted the rough; "she is thinkin' seriously, but you will see she will say no!"

"Let her speak for herself," requested Payne.

"Certain I will; I ain't influencin' of her in the least. All I want to say is that I never seen her before in creation, and when you ask if she has seen me, it's dollars ter doughnuts she answers no!"

"Mary, speak out!" directed Payne.

"What, sir?" she asked, faintly.

"Do you know this man?"

"No, sir!"

"Didn't I tell ye?" demanded Burke, triumphantly. "There ain't a fraction o' evidence that she an' me was ever tergether. Of course not. Never seen me, did ye, gal?"

"No, sir."

"Mary," interrupted Irena, sternly, "I have seen you with him."

"Pshaw, pshaw!" cried Burke.

"Mary," added Mr. Payne, "how is it?"

"I don't know, sir," faltered Mary.

"Do you know this man?"

"No, sir."

"Did you ever see him before?"

"No, sir."

"Mary," cried Miss Payne, "why do you lie to me?"

"I—I don't, miss."

"If your memory is so poor, let me quicken it. Recall the time when I asked you to go out with me to act as my companion when I paid an evening call of a few moments to Mrs. Ober. You remained by the area gate. When I came out I found you in conversation with a man whom I saw distinctly. You will remember. Again, I saw you when I was returning from the six o'clock tea at Mrs. Alleyn's, and I looked from the carriage and saw you by the mailbox. The same man was with you then, and this is he!"

She pointed to Burke.

"Accidental resemblancel" declared the rough, stubbornly. "Mary will tell you so. Speak out, girl; tell them ef it was me. Of course it wasn't, but we want your word."

"Speak, Mary!" added Mr. Payne.

Mary broke into passionate tears.

"Poor thing!" cried Burke, "she is harassed, but she can't remember w'ot ain't so. That's a gal o' truth—yes, an' she can't remember this. How is it, gal?"

"No, sir."

"Was it me with you on them occasions?"

"No, sir."

"An' did you ever see me before to-night?"

"No, sir."

Chesterham Payne smiled slightly. He had seen from the first that Burke was to all appearances coaching Mary, but even at that the deception was not good. He saw that there was lying somewhere, and persistent denials did not deceive him.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE SHADOW OF THE CRIME.

THE commissioner looked sharply at Mary Moss and Burke, but whatever he saw in their faces went without being commented on by him. He hesitated for a moment, and then again came into the conversation.

"Mr. Jackson," he remarked, "I think we had better let this rest for awhile. With matters as mixed up as they are I do not feel like giving you money, and as for—"

"Giving him money?" cried Irena. "What you want to do is to have him arrested immediately."

Payne was silent.

"It is all a scheme to get money out of you. The hider found, and now he wants to be paid for it. Don't let him escape justice."

Burke waxed ugly.

"Ef you want to make war, do it!" he exclaimed, "but afore you go too fur, consult Mr. Rob Payne about it. Ask Rob who had you taken away from here, first, and then

see if you want ter ride too rough over me! Hark to that!"

Payne made no answer to this plain insinuation, but still stood in thought. One person moved. Nicholas Blackwood left the front parlor, moved quietly to the street door and let himself out without any one having heard him go.

"There will be a compromise," he thought, as he passed down the block. "Neither Burke nor Payne dares be too vigorous. The rough will come out a free man, but without his coveted money. He and the august commissioner both fear to press matters to a crisis."

Reaching the corner the detective waited patiently, and it was not long before Burke Jackson came out of the house.

"My good sir," thought Nick, "I think it will do no harm to follow you to your lair. I want to keep posted on all the members of this interesting combine."

Blackwood and Jackson disappeared from the block.

It was less than half an hour later when Robertson Payne came toward the house. He had changed a good deal since the night when Danny Fox was killed. He had grown old noticeably, and his steps were slow and heavy.

On this occasion he entered the house, hung up his hat and entered the parlor. Then he stopped short—Chesterham and Irena were there.

Miss Payne ran forward with a glad cry.

"Father, father!" she exclaimed.

She clasped her arms around his neck, but he recoiled from the touch. He seemed to be positively afraid of her.

"What—what—what's this?" he cried.

"Father, I am back!" Irena exclaimed.

"Destruction! where did you come from?" demanded Robertson.

"From prison."

"Who let you out? Who dared to do it? Who dared to do it? I say. I told them to keep you fast."

"You told them to—to—"

Irena stopped short in bewilderment.

"This carelessness shall be answered for," added Payne, warmly.

The commissioner came forward.

"Brother," he spoke, gently, "your thoughts wander. Of course you did not shut Irena up; of course not. You have been greatly worried by her absence, and have lost sleep over it until you are not well. This made you confused for a moment when you saw her here, and you spoke wildly. Certainly, you are glad to see our child back. Irena is very welcome, and nobody else is so glad to see her as you. Is not this true, brother?"

Mild, kindly and persuasive was the address, and it influenced Robertson a little. He pressed his hand to his head, seemed to struggle with some unknown force for awhile, and then suddenly started forward and took his daughter's hand.

"Dear girl, dear girl!" he murmured, "I am so glad you have come. This has broken my heart—just broken my heart!"

"Father, I know your love for me."

"Yes, yes; I do love you tenderly. Did I say I was the one who had you abducted? All a joke, my love; all a joke. Wasn't it good? Ha! ha! ha!"

"Yes, very good," replied the younger man, with a warning glance at Irena. "I wonder, brother, that you can jest when you are so much worn out, but sleep will make you all right."

"That's it; that's just it!" declared Robertson, shaking his finger at the commissioner. "What I need is sleep; I have said so all along. I will sleep, to-night."

Irena was looking as if ready to weep, and at the same time sadly worried and puzzled, but her uncle interested Robertson in some other matter, and then whispered to her:

"Your absence has told sadly on him, and he is mentally disordered a trifle, but he will come around all right. Your presence will do more than anything else to accomplish this result."

Irena caught the idea, and though she was in a mood anything but fit for the task of acting the physician, she took it upon herself to soothe the old gentleman, and succeeded very well.

She, however, was sorely in need of sleep, and she soon retired, leaving the brothers

alone. Then Robertson looked at Chesterham with a crafty expression.

"We fooled her nicely," he remarked.

"About what?" asked the commissioner.

"The fact that it was I who abducted her."

Chesterham regarded his brother keenly.

"Did you really do it?"

"Oh! yes."

"Why?"

"You know this is a queer house."

"In what way?"

"I mean about the killing of Danny Fox."

"What had that to do with your taking Irena away?"

"Well, it's just like this: There were secrets in this house, and it was no place for her. So I got Rhoes to kidnap her. I want to apologize for the fact that you got used so severely in seeking to save her from abduction. I was sorry you were hurt; I really was."

"I don't see why it was necessary to take her away," persisted the commissioner.

"Brother," quickly returned Robertson, "I think the less we say on that head, the better. By the way; how is the hunt for Danny Fox's slayers coming on?"

"I know nothing about it. Blackwood is not confidential to me, and I have not the heart to investigate closely as to his progress. If he is doing anything, he is very quiet."

"Possibly he is at a loss."

"He is a shrewd man; a most successful detective."

"Ches, you should have silenced him before this."

The commissioner started.

"Brother, you have used that word before. You told me some days back that you thought I ought to 'silence' Blackwood. What do you mean? Would you kill him?"

Robertson started in turn.

"Bless me, no; I wouldn't suggest that for the world, Ches."

"Then what do you mean by 'silencing' him?"

"Why, bless me!" replied Robertson, "I simply meant that he ought to be taken off the case. I intended to advise you to put him on some other work, and give the Fox case to a less shrewd detective. I was afraid that if Blackwood remained on the case he would find out who did kill Danny Fox."

An expression akin to relief had been on the commissioner's face as he heard the first words, but he relapsed into gloom as the reply progressed.

"We must bend every energy," added the elder man, "to keep Nick from learning how Fox died."

"Frankly, I fear it will be useless."

"Why?"

"You remember the man we found in this house, the night of the murder, and how we had our brother Josiah take him off to the hospital. I have not before mentioned the fact, but, one day, lately, when I went out of the door, here, a man stood by the stoop, looking at our house. It was the unknown man we carted off to the hospital."

"Ha! back here?" cried Robertson.

"Yes. Now, if he remembered where this house was, may he not remember more?"

"We are lost!" exclaimed Robertson.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

UNDER WATCH.

NAPOLEON NICK was seated in his private room, reading a newspaper, when the colored servant ushered in a visitor who proved to be Cassius Rand. The wanderer was smoking a cigar; he carried a cane, and his whole appearance was that of a man who was at peace with himself and all the rest of the world.

Blackwood would have risen, but he was stopped by a motion from the new-comer.

"Keep your seat; keep your seat. That chair looks too cozy to be vacated all for nothing. Don't stand on ceremony."

"I'll obey you in this," replied Nick. "Make yourself comfortable, also."

"No. I have come on business."

"Business?"

"Mr. Detective," continued the visitor, abruptly, "what will you give to learn who killed Danny Fox?"

Nick started forward, but Cassius stood before him with his usual cool unconcern. Then the wanderer suddenly turned to the still-lingering servant, and added:

"Didn't the bell ring again?"

The colored man took the hint and beat a retreat.

"What do you mean?" inquired Nicholas, quickly.

"I was just giving our African brother a bug for his brain, as he showed a disposition to linger unduly. Yet, I am not wholly joking. See here!"

Cassius tossed several slips of paper into Nick's lap, and the latter looked at them without delay.

"Pawn-tickets!" he exclaimed.

"Even so, and if you will study them closer you will see they were made out by the pawnbroker who took in Payne's stolen property inadvertently. More, these tickets are for the very articles lost by Payne. In brief, we have the tickets received by the thief."

"How did you get them?"

Cassius laughed.

"This will tell," he answered, throwing another slip of paper into the detective's lap.

"Ah! a note signed with Strike McGinnis's name."

"You do well to make it out. If you read the rest I shall credit you with ability to read all the ancient inscriptions on monuments in Egypt, and elsewhere, for Strike is more skillful at setting up bowling-pins than writing."

"The writing is bad. Tell me briefly how he got the tickets."

"Invaded a certain room, and took them from the occupant's pocket, the aforesaid occupant being out. You'll find the occupant's name in the letter, if you look sharp."

Thus led on Nick tried his luck again, and managed to decipher the note in full. He looked up with a thoughtful face.

"I am not surprised to learn who the pawner was—"

"Say, but Dolly Brown is in high feather. She still wears her disguise as a boy—very reckless of her—and she and Strike are red-hot at detective work."

"What are they doing?"

"I don't know, though I can guess. I have been voted a 'slow poke' by Dolly—those were her words—and I am not allowed even to know their momentous secrets. Blackwood, does this robbery matter dovetail with the murder affair?"

"That's the question—does it?"

"If I were a mind-reader, I would tell you. Not being one, I don't know. However, you can now get a better grip on your subject."

"I think I have a fairly good grip," grimly returned Nick. "Before many moons I expect to garner in both the diamond-thief and the murderer. This paper"—touching Strike's letter—"tells me by inference who the thief is. As for the murderer—well, if the Payne family were not afraid of you, why did they cart you off to the hospital?"

"Well asked. That reminds me, Blackwood—you remember I once came to you and told you I had got some new things into my head about the night I went to lie on Payne's lounge, and there saw convict 2,009 and other persons. I told you I either remembered a fight in which Danny was killed when he was lying by the window, or else my efforts to remember more had conjured up such beliefs from nothing."

"Yes, and you were uncertain whether you did remember more than you had remembered when you woke in the hospital, or not."

"I have decided that the later recollections were moonshine, and that I did not see Danny struck—in brief, that I know nothing after I saw Danny go to the closet."

"Just as well, perhaps."

"My cigar is out, Blackwood. Can you start me off anew?"

"I can, and will. Help yourself."

For an hour Cassius remained and took life easy in the way peculiar to him, and then he left Nicholas alone. Not long was the room tenanted, for the detective went out and made his way up-town. He went to the vicinity of Payne's house, but did not call or make himself visible to the inmates.

All that afternoon he haunted the vicinity. Patience seemed to be one of his cardinal virtues, for he showed no weariness or concern. He was at his post when darkness fell, and then he went closer to the house.

Shortly after a female form emerged from the basement gate and hurried away eastward. It was Mary Moss.

Nicholas followed calmly.

The servant's way took her to the Park, and she entered that place. At the entrance she exhibited some caution, but the darkness prevented her from recognizing the quiet form well back of her. She went on; Nick again followed.

Under a tree which had a fringe of bushes about it she finally paused. There she was joined by a man. Nick did not intend to miss anything he could overhear or see, but the chances of getting near them were so poor that he paused.

"Hus s-sh!" sounded a voice close to him.

He turned quickly.

"Strike Maginnis!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, boss, it's me, sure-pop, an' here is Dolly Brown, too."

"How came you here?"

"Been pipin' Burke Jackson an' that's him over there who has jest met the gal you have been pipin'."

"Why have they met?"

"Don't know, an' how kin we find out? It will be next ter impossible ter creep up an' listen."

"It must be done, Strike, but it falls to me to do the work. I wish you and Dolly to keep well back, and not interfere with my efforts. I go alone."

It was only after long and patient effort that he got near enough to act the desired part.

Then he took in all with avidity.

"Now you hush up that snivelin'!" Burke was saying. "Can't you keep yer tears in storage fer awhile? Where is yer nerve? Be a man—I mean, be nervy. There ain't nothin' fer us ter be afraid on."

"Oh! but I am afraid, Burke," tremulously replied Mary.

"Bah! Brace up! No danger fer us, I say. Fact is you are so worked up by the fact that the Paynes killed Danny Fox that you ain't no brace left, I reckon. Imitate me! I've got a pile o' nerve. Do ye know how I put Irena on the stage? That was nerve fer you!"

"Why did you do it?"

"I'll tell ye. I fell in with a happy-go-lucky theater feller who had an act he wanted ter put on the stage—et was the Sleepin' Statoo business—an' he asked me ter go in. He said I would jest fill the part o' the tramp—drat his impudence! Wal, I had been plannin' ter rescue Irena—ha, ha! fancy me rescuin' her!—an' I thought I seen the chance ter make the rescue right dramatic. She was drugged an' obeyed all she was told ter do. Why not take her to the stage, an' then do the rescue act there, an' make my work a big hit? So I thought, an' I tried it, but that durned detective spoiled my plans."

"It was a wild scheme."

"Anyhow, it was me who brought her home."

"You did not get paid for it."

"I mean to."

"I don't think you will."

"I ain't done yet," replied Burke. "Fact is, the Payne family is all on the scare fer fear harm will come ter them. Fear will make them pay me off. See?"

"I wish you would keep away from there."

"Why, you ain't got the nerve of a mouse."

"Burke, I am scared to death!" admitted Mary, tearfully.

"Why?"

"The murder of Danny Fox is a nightmare to me."

"Stuff an' nonsense! There ain't no earthly use why you should feel so. Don't get all wrapped up in the Paynes. What if they should be hung fer killin' Danny? Of course they did it, an' why shouldn't they suffer for it? Yes, they killed Danny, sure!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE ATHLETE'S MASTERSTROKE.

THE following forenoon a caller came to the Payne residence. It was none other than the athlete sport. He had walked boldly down the block; he had boldly ascended the stoop, and his air was that of a master when he sent his name to Irena.

Some doubt had been in his mind as to whether she would come at his call, but she

did come promptly. He rose, but she met him with a face cold of expression and repelling.

"Well?" was her abrupt greeting.

A sullen, angry look came to Aleck's face.

"You meet me graciously!" he exclaimed, bitterly.

"What do you expect?"

"Not what I have, in the past; not cold contempt. I expect decent treatment, now—yes, and I expect," exultantly added the athlete, "to have you at my feet!"

"Why?"

"Because I know the secret of the past!"

Irena began to look uneasy.

"I don't understand."

"You shall be enlightened," replied Aleck, quickly. "Miss Irena, when you went to the Horatius Club-house, and I caught you fumbling in Danny's clothes which had been left in the locker, you went to get something you thought would tell against you if it was found. I don't know what it was, but I have studied it all out. Danny had some time given you keys which you used that night—more fool he!—and you got in. You secured something from his clothes—possibly letters—"

He watched closely, and her change of expression made him look triumphantly.

"So I have guessed it! I thought I was right, and that is settled; but, let it drop. I have other things to speak of now."

Without giving her time to reply, he continued rapidly:

"All this set me to thinking, and I have done some hunting among Danny's effects, myself. More I have found something. All along I have been aware that there was a mystery in the past in which you and Danny had share. At last, I know what it is, and all because I found a full statement among Danny's papers."

Irena watched the speaker with uneasiness, but said nothing. He went on rapidly:

"I know now that when we were all together in the country, three years ago, you and Danny planned to elope, and had the minister all engaged for the ceremony. I know what stopped it; I know that you pushed a man from the bridge, and that the event broke off the marriage."

Irena had dropped into a chair, her face very white. Still she was silent.

"No wonder," pursued the athlete, with the triumphant vindictiveness of a small nature, "that you did not feel like carrying out the engagement and getting married, that night. Danny says you did not mean to drown the man, and we will take his word for it, but drown him you did, and you know what has come of it."

Irena put out her hands in mute appeal, but Aleck continued in the same hurried manner:

"People wonder why Danny was murdered in this house. I do not wonder in the least; the whole wretched business is too clear for that. Danny came here a fugitive. He had escaped from Sing Sing, and when he learned that I was out of town, he looked for another refuge. He came here, believing your heart would be soft enough to help an unfortunate man. How was it?"

"Forbear!" whispered Irena.

"So you want mercy? Well, Danny wanted mercy that night. What did he get? You know just what happened then; I don't, but I can guess that Danny asked for shelter, and it was refused him. Possibly he threatened in his despair to tell of the past, but one thing is sure: He sealed his fate when he came to this house, for, to prevent him from telling the story of the past, he was deliberately murdered by the Payne family!"

"Scoundrel, you speak an infamous falsehood!"

The words were forcibly uttered by the door, and Alexander turned toward that point. Commissioner Payne was there, his face white and full of fury.

"Villain and liar!" he added, hoarsely.

Alexander had expected to meet one of the brothers, and took up the work promptly.

"I heard of certain things you said—you and your brother—at the time Danny was sent to prison. I know that Robertson Payne declared he would kill him on sight."

"It was a rash but empty speech. You know as well as I do that the crime which took your brother to Sing Sing was one of

peculiar atrocity. He had a young man in his toils and lured him on to bet on the horse-races; and the result of it was that his victim became infatuated and stole money to play the races as stated."

"Danny did not ask him to steal, and—"

"The wife of his victim was well known to us, for she had been a faithful cashier in our store when we were in business. The husband and Danny quarreled, and the husband was slain in the fight which followed. It did not come out at the trial, but my brother and I learned, subsequently, that Danny Fox's scheme, when he got the husband going wrong, was to ruin him so he could win his wife. It was this that made Robertson Payne and myself—"

"So Danny's private character has been worrying you? Well, about Miss Irena's—what about the man she pushed to his death in the river?"

"She did nothing of the sort."

"I say she did! Here is the statement, written by Danny. It tells why there was no marriage. Read how the supposed drowned man was pushed to his death by Irena."

"She never did anything of the sort. The coroner's jury brought in a verdict that the miserable wretch was drowned while trying to move about in an intoxicated condition."

"Irena, speak out," directed the commissioner.

The girl moaned feebly, but was silent.

"See!" cried Aleck. "She does not deny it; she cannot!"

"I deny it for her, sir!" indignantly exclaimed Payne.

"Writhe, if you will!" sneered Aleck, "but I have you in the toils. Here is Danny's own story, and it does not depend on his word. Miss Payne will remember that, on that night, she and Danny were ferried across the river by a certain boatman. Danny's paper gave the name of the boatman, and I have been to him. He denied all, at first, but when I gave him the paper, and he saw denial would be in vain, he broke down and talked freely. There is a living witness to all I claim, and he will swear that Miss Payne pushed the fellow from the bridge!"

With a cry Irena dropped to her knees.

"It is true, true!" she cried, despairingly. "I did it; I did push him off, but it was the act of a moment of frenzy; I did not intend to do him harm!"

Chesterham Payne stood dumfounded. He had not looked for this revelation, or even dreamed that the charge was true, and the confession upset him wholly. He could only look blankly at Irena, cowering as she was on the floor.

"Now," added the athlete, "will you claim there was no motive for murdering poor Danny?"

Commissioner Payne turned upon the speaker like an aroused lion.

"Scoundrel! what do you mean to insinuate?" he demanded.

"That your gang killed Danny."

"You lie, sir; you lie!" hotly cried the commissioner.

"We will see what a court of law will say to it."

Irena sprung to her feet.

"Pay this man!" she implored, hurriedly. "Pay him what he wishes, as a price of silence. Alexander Fox, you shall be paid well; you shall have thousands—ay, money without stint. Uncle, write your check for what he will ask. Here, here!" she fumbled in her bosom and brought out a well-filled purse—"here is the first installment, to pay you. Only keep silent! Here, here!"

Speaking hysterically she had tried to force the purse into the athlete's hands, but he struck it away angrily.

"No!" he almost shouted; "I am not to be bought! I seek revenge; I seek satisfaction for a brother's blood. Sell my silence? Never, never! I live only for revenge!"

"Take it, take it!" Irena again implored.

"Not a cent will I take."

"He received no injury at our hands!" declared Payne, warmly.

"You murdered him!"

"Scoundrel! you would not be so forward if called upon to prove what you assert. Prove it? No, no; you cannot, for it is false. I defy you to prove it."

"If I can't prove one murder I can another!" shouted the athlete. "Miss Payne killed, ay, murdered the man by the river!"

Words had followed each other with great rapidity, for all three of the party were terribly wrought up, but there was now to be something more than words. Chesterham Payne was maddened with fury, and he leaped bodily upon Fox. Aleck was quite as full of rage as his assailant, and he met the attack willingly. Both men grappled, while a cry of terror fell from Irena's lips. She clasped her hands and stood with extended eyes and pallid face while they reeled back and forth in that wild struggle.

It was not a long contest. The athlete flung the commissioner heavily to the floor. Then he knelt on his person.

"I have you!" he cried. "You are mine! You are down, and what is to prevent me from serving you as you served Danny? Aristocratic villain! take this!"

He closed his fingers tightly around Payne's neck.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE TRUTH AT LAST.

IRENA's life-current seemed to flow but feebly, yet she managed to sound a faint cry: "Help! In mercy's name, help!"

And help came quickly. There was a rush of heavy feet, and Aleck Fox was thrown away from the commissioner with energy. He sprawled on the floor, but was up promptly. He looked for the new adversary; he found him.

It was Nicholas Blackwood.

"Stand where you are, sir!" commanded the detective. "One more attempt like the last and you will be sorry for it."

"As usual, the police help the thieves and murderers!" hissed the angry athlete. "I'm not surprised that you help Payne."

"Be less ready with your tongue, sir, or I will knock you down!" retorted Nick. "You accused the Paynes of murder. Now we will see what there is in the charge."

The detective beat his foot on the floor, and several persons entered the room without ceremony. Among them were Cassius Rand, Dolly Brown and Strike Maginnis, but most of them were detectives, as it proved. And the latter men had in charge a person not a stranger in these pages—Burke Jackson. Not the old Burke, flip-pant and confident, but a new Burke, ironed, helpless and frightened.

"It has been asserted," said Nick quickly, "that Danny Fox was murdered by some member of the Payne family. Let me show you the real murderer. Behold him!—Burke Jackson!"

His words and his leveled finger seemed to fill the prisoner with terror anew, and Burke's face was convulsed with emotion. Suddenly, despite his ironed hands, he threw himself at the feet of Commissioner Payne, and wild words poured from his livid lips.

"Spare me, spare me!" he cried. "I did not mean to kill Danny Fox! I had no thought of doing so, but he and I met in the darkness and I had to do it to escape. He seized hold of me, and I couldn't let him have his own way. I didn't know he was there; I thought it was some member of the household, and I was afraid of being captured as a thief. I fought with him; I got hold of the cuspidor, and I hit him with it. Even then I meant no ill will to him. I didn't know he was dead, and I laid him on the lounge and left him there. I didn't know he was dead until the next mornin' when I see it in the papers."

"You are talking about Danny Fox, are you?" quietly asked Nick.

"Yes, yes; and I—"

"I call on those present to heed and remember this confession," interrupted Nick. "I have heard it before, but all have heard it now."

"Spare me!" still implored Burke, addressing Payne. "You are a great man, and you can do it if you will. Have mercy!"

He was removed to the next room and then Blackwood went on with his statement.

"The whole truth is known about the killing of Danny Fox. Mary Moss, the servant, had a lover in the shape of Burke Jackson. He was an ill-favored man, and she dared not let him come to this house.

"On the night that Danny was killed, how-

ever, Burke did come here. Ostensibly, he came to visit Mary. He has since confessed that it was to commit robbery. He was in the kitchen with Mary when Danny came here, but he heard nothing of it. Later, unknown to Mary, he succeeded in stealing diamonds from the rooms above, and then started out by the rear.

"In the darkness he stumbled over Danny Fox. Each thinking the other was a deadly foe, they fought in silence, until Burke, getting hold of the cuspidor by chance, dealt a blow with it which killed Fox then and there. Not knowing, in the darkness, who he was, or that the blow had killed him, the murderer put him on the lounge and escaped by the rear window.

"He had the stolen diamonds. One ring he dropped near the street, and it was later found by Mr. Cassius Rand, but the rest of the stuff he took down-town and pawned.

"When he knew murder had been done he had only to keep quiet, for not even Mary Moss knew he was the guilty one. At first Mary did not suspect her lover's guilt, but later on, she did grow suspicious, but she kept her own counsel, suffering fear which unnerved her totally.

"Evidence has been accumulating against Burke, especially since my young friend, Strike Maginnis, intruded in Burke's room, found his vest and secured pawn-tickets for the stolen property from it; but it remained for Burke's own lips to reveal his guilt plainly.

"Last night he met Mary Moss in the Park. At the beginning he was wary, for she did not then have knowledge of his crime, but, as their talk progressed, he boasted of the deed.

"He confessed to the robbery, and to the murder, and cleared up many things which had puzzled me. Among others, he said that when he took the diamonds from here he also took a carving-knife belonging to Mr. Payne—not because of its value, but to defend himself if he was discovered. He had it when fighting with Danny Fox, but did not use it.

"Learning that I was on the case, he determined to kill me, to save himself from danger. He entered my room at night, when I was asleep; we fought, and I disarmed him and put him to flight. As he was masked I did not recognize him, but I still have the knife.

"Such is the true story of the killing of Danny Fox. Are you satisfied?"

With this question Nicholas turned to Alexander. The latter's expression told that he was not satisfied, for he bitterly replied:

"Another crime remains unavenged. I accuse Miss Irena Payne of having taken human life, three years ago, by pushing a man from a bridge in the town of—"

"Your last vicious blow falls harmless," interrupted Nick severely. "No murder was done there. If you will recall the circumstances you will remember that a fugitive from law was found drowned in the river. There seemed to be full proof that, while intoxicated, he had fallen in of his own lack of caution, and some distance above the bridge, and that he floated down to where he was found.

"But, he was not the man who was pushed from the bridge by Miss Payne. We do not deny the pushing act, but, it was Burke Jackson who was thus used—"

"Oh! come!" cried Aleck, "you are too eager to clear your pets, the Paynes. Don't load all on poor Jackson."

"I have it from his own lips. Recently, he was in that country town, and curiously enough, again met Irena there by the bridge. He tried to accost her, and was thrown off into the river by a friend of hers. This seemed nothing, then, but, last night, when in the Park and telling his secrets freely to Mary Moss, he referred to the recent adventure, and said it was not the first time he had been used thus at that very point.

"He then told how he had been pushed from the bridge, three years ago, by a girl to him unknown, and how a dead body had been found near the spot, the next morning. Burke escaped, and we can rely upon it that the man then found drowned met his death just as the coroner said he did, and that Miss Payne never laid hands, or even eyes on the drowned man."

"Thank Heaven!" exclaimed Irena.

Nicholas turned to Commissioner Payne.

"I think, sir," he modestly added, "that there will be no further shadow over your household."

Payne tried to speak, but his trembling lips were long in framing a reply. Then he said in a lower tone:

"Can I see you alone, Mr. Blackwood?"

"At once, sir."

"Leave your party here and go with me to my private room. I think Irena may be excused to go where she will."

"Yes, sir. And one more may be excused." With this he turned to Alexander and added: "If you are not satisfied, Fox, you can see me whenever you wish."

The athlete flushed.

"Per-perhaps I had better go now," he faltered.

"Seriously, I think you had, sir."

And Aleck went like a whipped cur.

Alone with Payne in the room above, Nick found the flood-gates quickly opened.

"I, too, have a confession to make!" cried the commissioner. "All through this case you have lacked my co-operation. It was because I suspected my own kindred of having killed Danny Fox, and I think they suspected me of the same act.

"We knew Danny Fox was here that night. He appeared first to Irena, and, with pleadings and threats, got her to hide him in a closet, so I would not see him. She did not have a chance to see him again until I, by accident discovered the man in his hiding-place, when I entered the parlor, later.

"Irena pleaded wildly that he be allowed to go free—you can guess her object, when you recall the bridge episode—and she prevailed over both my brother Robertson and myself. We agreed to keep our hands off, but we ordered Danny Fox out of the house.

"Then we discovered another man—a sick and unconscious man on the lounge in our parlor. Had he heard all, seen all? He was then unconscious, and so ill he seemed a mere wreck. We talked and decided on a plan. A brother of ours was let into our confidence a trifle, and the man was taken to the hospital and left there, with no clue as to who sent him.

"Imagine our consternation when Fox's body was found in our house the next morning! I'll not dwell on it, but you can guess the rest. I believe that Irena and Robertson reasoned as I did, thus: Had Danny returned during the night, met one of our family and been slain in the heat of passion?

"Yes, it is beyond question that each of us suspected the other, but we held our peace, even when alone with each other. Great heavens! how could we have suspected each other, loving each other as we did?

"Poor Robertson! He has felt it the worst, and he is ill of body and slightly deranged of mind. Only for that he would never have done the wild deed of having Irena abducted. But, thank Providence, the sun is shining again, and we owe all to you. May Heaven bless you, Blackwood!" and the commissioner grasped Nick's hand.

Public suspicion had never fallen on the Paynes, and by Nick's future wisdom it was averted forever. Burke Jackson received twenty years for manslaughter. Aleck Fox's private character was looked into, and the Athlete Sport went to Sing Sing for three years.

Robertson Payne fully recovered, and he and his brother keep the old house, with Irena's help, and all are happy.

Strike Maginnis remains Nick's helper.

Cassius Rand concluded to settle down for life, and, after securing a lucrative position, did so, receiving much aid from Dolly Brown. She had made sure of him by becoming Mrs. Rand.

Nicholas Blackwood did not again seek Irena's company with thoughts of matrimony, but his work as a detective continues brilliant. He well deserves the title of The Detective of Destiny.

THE END.

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THE SOFT HAND DETECTIVE;
OR,
DAN DUNN'S RIGHT HAND MAN.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.